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DECEMBER

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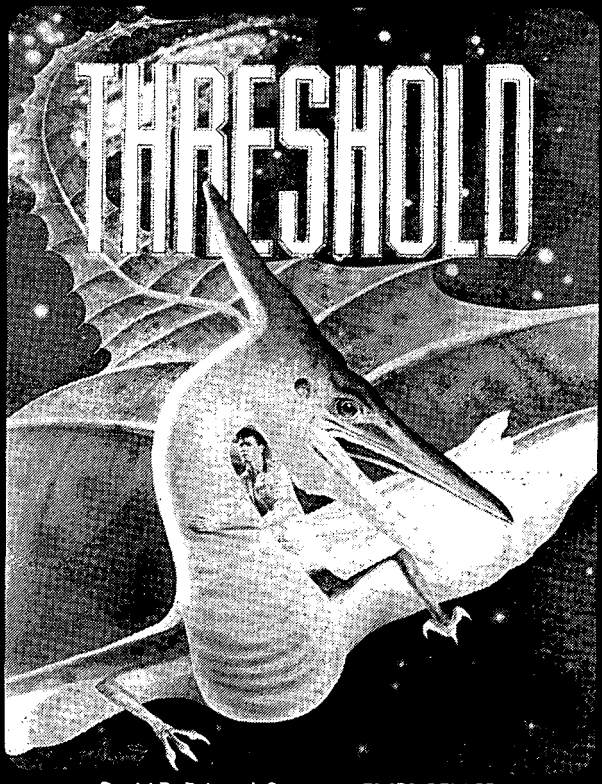

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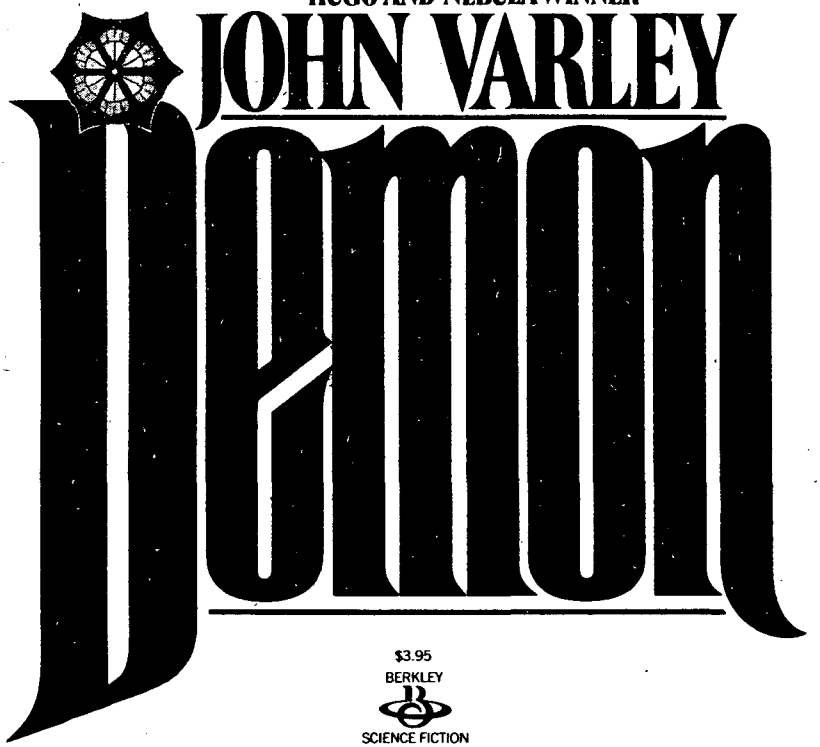

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This new Lucius Shepard story is something a bit different, not that the Hugo and Nebula award nominee has shown any tendency to repeat himself. The tale is about a young man who attaches himself to a group of expatriate Americans living on the Costa del Sol, and about his encounter with a strange couple on a dangerous mission.

A Spanish Lesson

BY
LUCIUS SHEPARD

That winter of '64, when I was seventeen and prone to obey the impulses of my heart as if they were illuminations produced by years of contemplative study, I dropped out of college and sailed to Europe, landing in Belfast, hitchiking across Britain, down through France and Spain, and winding up on the Costa del Sol — to be specific, in a village near Malaga by the name of Pedregalejo — where one night I was to learn something of importance. What had attracted me to the village was not its quaintness, its vista of the placid Mediterranean and neat white stucco houses and little bandy-legged fishermen mending nets; rather, it was the fact that the houses along the shore were occupied by a group of expatriates, mostly Americans, who posed for me a bohemian ideal.

The youngest of them was seven years older than I, the eldest three times my age, and among them they had amassed a wealth of experience that cause me envy and made me want to become like them: bearded, be-earringed, and travel-wise. There was, for example, Leonard Somstaad, a Swedish poet with the poetic malady of a weak heart and a fondness for *marjoun* (hashish candy); there was Art Shapiro, a wanderer who had for ten years migrated between Pedregalejo and Istanbul; there was Don Washington, a black ex-GI and blues singer, whose Danish girlfriend — much to the delight of the locals — was given to nude sunbathing; there was Robert Braehme, a New York actor who, in the best theatrical tradition, attempted halfheartedly to kill several of the others, suffered a nervous breakdown, and had to be returned to the States under restraint.

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And then there was Richard Shockley, a tanned, hook-nosed man in his late twenties, who was the celebrity of the group. A part-time smuggler (mainly of marijuana) and a writer of some accomplishment. His first novel, *The Celebrant*, had created a minor critical stir. Being a fledgling writer myself, it was he whom I most envied. In appearance and manner he suited my notion of what a writer should be. For a while he took an interest in me, teaching me smuggling tricks and lecturing on the moral imperatives of art; but shortly thereafter he became preoccupied with his own affairs and our relationship deteriorated.

In retrospect I can see that these people were unremarkable; but at the time they seemed impossibly wise, and in order to align myself with them, I rented a small beach house, bought a supply of notebooks, and began to fill them with page after page of attempted poetry.

Though I had insinuated myself into the group, I was not immediately accepted. My adolescence showed plainly against the backdrop of their experience. I had no store of anecdotes, no expertise with flute or guitar, and my conversation was lacking in hip savoir faire. In their eyes I was a kid, a baby, a clever puppy who had learned how to beg, and I was often the object of ridicule. Three factors saved me from worse ridicule: my size (six foot three, one-ninety), my erratic temper, and my ability to consume enormous quantities of drugs. This last was my great trick, my means of gaining respect. I would perform feats of ingestion that would leave Don Washington, a consummate doper, shaking his head in awe. Pills, powders, herbs — I was indiscriminate, and I initiated several dangerous dependencies in hopes of achieving equal status.

Six weeks after moving to the beach, I raised myself a notch in the general esteem by acquiring a girlfriend, a fey California blonde named Anne Fisher. It amuses me to recall the event that led Anne to my bed, because it smacked of the worst of cinema verité, an existential moment opening onto a bittersweet romance. We were walking on the beach, a rainy day, sea and sky blending in a slate fog toward Africa, both of us stoned near to the point of catatonia, when we happened upon a drowned kitten. Had I been unaccompanied, I might have inspected the corpse for bugs and passed on; but as it was, being under Anne's scrutiny, I babbled some nonsense about "this inconstant image of the world," half of which I was parroting from a Eugenio Montale poem, and proceeded to give the kitten decent burial beneath a flat rock.

After completing this nasty chore, I stood and discovered Anne staring at me wetly, her maidenly nature overborne by my unexpected sensitivity. No words were needed. We

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were alone on the beach, with Nina Simone's bluesy whisper issuing from a window of one of the houses, gray waves slopping at our feet. As if pressed together by the vast emptiness around us, we kissed. Anne clawed my back and ground herself against me: you might have thought she had been thirsting for me all her nineteen years, but I came to understand that her desperation was born of philosophical bias and not sexual compulsion. She was deep into sadness as a motif for passion, and she liked thinking of us as two worthless strangers united by a sudden perception of life's pathetic fragility. Fits of weeping and malaise alternating with furious bouts of lovemaking were her idea of romantic counterpoint.

By the time she left me some months later, I had grown thoroughly sick of her; but she had — I believed — served her purpose in establishing me as a full-fledged expatriate.

Wrong. I soon found that I was still the kid, the baby, and I realized that I would remain so until someone of even lesser status moved to the beach, thereby nudging me closer to the mainstream. This didn't seem likely, and in truth I no longer cared; I had lost respect for the group: had I not, at seventeen, become as hiply expatriated as they, and wouldn't I, when I reached their age, be off to brighter horizons? Then, as is often the case with reality, presenting us with what we desire at the moment desire begins to flag, two suitably substandard people rented the house next to mine.

Their names were Tom and Alise, and they were identical twins a couple of years older than I, hailing from — if you were to believe their story — Canada. Yet they had no knowledge of things Canadian, and their accent was definitely northern European. Not an auspicious entrée into a society as picky as Pedregalejo's. Everyone was put off by them, especially Richard Shockley, who saw them as a threat. "Those kind of people make trouble for everybody else," he said to me once. "They're just too damn weird." (It has always astounded me that those who pride themselves on eccentricity are so quick to deride this quality in strangers.) Others as well testified to the twins' weirdness: they were secretive, hostile; they had been seen making strange passes in the air on the beach, and that led some to believe they were religious nuts; they set lanterns in their windows at night and left them burning until dawn.

Their most disturbing aspect, however, was their appearance. Both were scarcely five feet tall, emaciated, pale, with black hair and squinty dark eyes and an elfin cleverness of feature that Shockley described as "prettily ugly, like Munchkins." He suggested that this look might be a product of inbreeding, and I thought he might be right: the twins had the

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sort of dulled presence that one associates with the retarded or the severely tranquilized. The fishermen treated them as if they were the devil's spawn, crossing themselves and spitting at the sight of them, and the expatriates were concerned that the fishermen's enmity would focus the attention of the Guardia Civil upon the beach.

The Guardia — with their comic-opera uniforms, their machine guns, their funny patent leather hats that from a distance looked like Mickey Mouse ears — were a legitimate menace. They had a long-standing reputation for murder and corruption, and were particularly fond of harassing foreigners. Therefore I was not surprised when a committee led by Shockley asked me to keep an eye on my new neighbors, the idea being that we should close ranks against them, even to the point of reporting any illegalities.

Despite knowing that refusal would consolidate my status as a young nothing, I told Shockley and his pals to screw off. I'm not able to take pride in this — had they been friendlier to me in the past, I might have gone along with the scheme; but as it was, I was happy to reject them. And further, in the spirit of revenge, I went next door to warn Tom and Alise.

My knock roused a stirring inside the house, whispers, and at last the door was cracked and an eye peeped forth. "Yes?" said Alise.

"Uh," I said, taken aback by this suspicious response. "My name's Lucius. From next door. I've got something to tell you about the people around here." Silence. "They're afraid of you," I went on. "They're nervous, because they've got dope and stuff, and they think you're going to bring the cops down on them."

Alise glanced behind her, more whispers, and then she said, "Why would we do that?"

"It's not that you'd do it on purpose," I said. "It's just that you're . . . different. You're attracting a lot of attention, and everyone's afraid that the cops will investigate you and then decide to bust the whole beach."

"Oh." Another conference, and finally she said, "Would you please come in?"

The door swung open, creaking like a coffin lid centuries closed, and I crossed the threshold. Tom was behind the door, and after shutting it, Alise ranged herself beside him. Her chest was so flat, their features so alike, it was only the length of her hair that allowed me to tell them apart. She gestured at a table-and-chairs set in the far corner, and, feeling a prickle of nervousness, I took a seat there. The room was similar to the living room of my house: whitewashed walls, unadorned and flaking; cheap production-line furniture (the signal difference being that they had two beds instead of one); a gas stove

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in a niche to the left of the door. Mounted just above the light switch was a plastic crucifix; a frayed cord ran up behind the cross to the fixture on the ceiling, giving the impression that Christ had some role to play in the transmission of the current.

They had kept the place scrupulously neat; the one sign of occupancy was a pile of notebooks and a sketchpad lying on the table. The pad was open to what appeared to be a rendering of complex circuitry. Before I could get a better look at it, Tom picked up the pad and tossed it onto the stove. Then they sat across from me, hands in their laps, as meek and quiet as two white mice. It was dark in the room, knife-edges of golden sunlight slanting through gaps in the shutter boards, and the twins' eyes were like dirty smudges on their pale skins.

"I don't know what more to tell you," I said. "And I don't have any idea what you should do. But I'd watch myself." They did not exchange glances or in any way visibly communicate, yet there was a peculiar tension to their silence, and I had the notion that they were again conferring: this increased my nervousness.

"We realize we're different," said Tom at length; his voice had the exact pitch and timbre of Alise's, soft and faintly burred. "We don't want to cause harm, but there's something we have to do here. It's dangerous, but we have to do it. We can't leave until it's done."

"We think you're a good boy," chimed in Alise, rankling me with this characterization. "We wonder if you would help us?"

I was perplexed. "What can I do?"

"The problem is one of appearances," said Tom. "We can't change the way we look, but perhaps we can change the way others perceive us. If we were to become more a part of the community, we might not be so noticeable."

"They won't have anything to do with you," I told him. "They're too. . . ."

"We have an idea," Alise cut in.

"Yes," said Tom. "We thought if there was the appearance of a romantic involvement between you and Alise, people might take us more for granted. We hoped you would be agreeable to having Alise move in with you."

"Now wait!" I said, startled. "I don't mind helping you, but I. . . ."

"It would only be for appearances' sake," said Alise, deadpan. "There'd be no need for physical contact, and I would try not to be an imposition. I could clean for you and do the shopping."

Perhaps it was something in Alise's voice or a subtle shift in attitude, but for whatever reason, it was then that I sensed their desperation. They were very, very afraid . . . of what, I had no inkling. But fear was palpable, a thready pulse in the air. It was a symptom of my youth that I did not

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associate their fear with any potential threat to myself; I was merely made the more curious. "What sort of danger are you in?" I asked.

Once again there was that peculiar nervy silence, at the end of which Tom said, "We ask that you treat this as a confidence."

"Sure," I said casually. "Who am I gonna tell?"

The story Tom told was plausible; in fact, considering my own history — a repressive, intellectual father who considered me a major disappointment, who had characterized my dropping out as "the irresponsible actions of a glandular case" — it seemed programmed to enlist my sympathy. He said that they were not Canadian but German, and had been raised by a dictatorial stepfather after their mother's death. They had been beaten, locked in closets, and fed so poorly that their growth had been affected. Several months before, after almost twenty years of virtual confinement, they had managed to escape, and since then they had kept one step ahead of detectives hired by the stepfather. Now, penniless, they were trying to sell some antiquities that they had stolen from their home; and once they succeeded in this, they planned to travel east, perhaps to India, where they would be beyond detection. But they were afraid that they would be caught while waiting for the sale to go through; they had had too little practice with the world to be able to pass as ordinary citizens.

"Well," I said when he had finished. "If you want to move in" — I nodded at Alise — "I guess it's all right. I'll do what I can to help you. But first thing you should do is quit leaving lanterns in your window all night. That's what really weirds the fishermen out. They think you're doing some kind of magic or something." I glanced back and forth between them. "What are you doing?"

"It's just a habit," said Alise. "Our stepfather made us sleep with the lights on."

"You'd better stop it," I said firmly; I suddenly saw myself playing Anne Sullivan to their Helen Keller, paving their way to a full and happy life, and this noble self-image caused me to wax enthusiastic. "Don't worry," I told them. "Before I'm through, you people are going to pass for genu-*wine* All-American freaks. I guarantee it!"

If I had expected thanks, I would have been disappointed. Alise stood, saying that she'd be right back, she was going to pack her things, and Tom stared at me with an expression that — had I not been so pleased with myself — I might have recognized for pained distaste.

The beach at Pedregalejo inscribed a grayish white crescent for about a hundred yards along the Mediterranean, bounded on the west by a rocky

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point and on the east by a condominium under construction, among the first of many that were gradually to obliterate the beauty of the coast. Beyond the beachfront houses occupied by the expatriates were several dusty streets lined with similar houses, and beyond them rose a cliff of ocher rock surmounted by a number of villas, one of which had been rented by an English actor who was in the area shooting a bullfighting movie: I had been earning my living of late as an extra on the film, receiving the equivalent of five dollars a day and lunch (also an equivalent value, consisting of a greasy sandwich and soda pop).

My house was at the extreme eastern end of the beach and differed from the rest in that it had a stucco porch that extended into the water. Inside, as mentioned, it was almost identical to the twins' house; but despite this likeness, when Alise entered, clutching an airline bag to her chest, she acted as if she had walked into an alien spacecraft. At first, ignoring my invitation to sit, she stood stiffly in the corner, flinching every time I passed; then, keeping as close to the walls as a cat exploring new territory, she inspected my possessions, peeking into my backpack, touching the strings of my guitar, studying the crude watercolors with which I had covered up flaking spots in the whitewash. Finally she sat at the table, knees pressed tightly together, and staring at her hands. I tried to draw her into a conversation but received mumbles in reply, and eventually, near sunset, I took a notebook and a bagful of dope, and went out onto the porch to write.

When I was even younger than I was in 1964, a boy, I'd assumed that all seas were wild, storm-tossed enormities, rife with monsters and mysteries and so, at first sight, the relatively tame waters of the Mediterranean had proved a disappointment. However, as time had passed, I'd come to appreciate the Mediterranean's subtle shifts in mood. On that particular afternoon, the sea near to shore lay in a rippled sheet stained reddish orange by the dying light; farther out, a golden haze obscured the horizon and made the skeletal riggings of the returning fishing boats seem like the crawling of huge insects in a cloud of pollen. It was the kind of antique weather from which you might expect the glowing figure of Agamemnon, say, or of some martial Roman soul to emerge with ghostly news concerning the sack of Troy or Masada.

I smoked several pipefuls of dope — it was Moroccan kef, a fine grade of marijuana salted with flecks of white opium — and was busy recording the moment in overwrought poetry, when Alise came up beside me and, again reminding me of a white mouse, sniffed the air. "What's that?" she asked, pointing at the pipe. I explained and offered a toke. "Oh, no," she said, but continued peering at

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the dope and after a second added, "My stepfather used to give us drugs. Pills that made us sleepy."

"This might do the same thing," I said airily, and went back to my scribbling.

"Well," she said a short while later. "Perhaps I'll try a little."

I doubt that she had ever smoked before. She coughed and hacked, and her eyes grew red-veined and weepy, but she denied that the kef was having any effect. Gradually, though, she lapsed into silence and sat staring at the water; then, perhaps five minutes after finishing her last pipe, she ran into the house and returned with a sketchpad. "This is wonderful," she said. "Wonderful! Usually it's so hard to see." And began sketching with a charcoal pencil.

I giggled, taking perverse delight in having gotten her high, and asked, "What's wonderful?" She merely shook her head, intent on her work. I would have pursued the question, but at that moment I noticed a group of expatriates strolling toward us along the beach. "Here's your chance to act normal," I said, too stoned to recognize the cruelty of my words.

She glanced up. "What do you mean?"

I nodded in the direction of the proto-hippies. They appeared to be as ripped as we were: one of the women was doing a clumsy, skipping dance along the tidal margin, and the others were staggering, laughing, shouting encouragement. Silhouetted against the violent colors of sunset, with their floppy hats and jerky movements, they had the look of shadow actors in a medieval mystery play. "Kiss me," I suggested to Alise. "Or act affectionate. Reports of your normalcy will be all over the beach before dark."

Alise's eyes widened, but she set down her pad. She hesitated briefly, then edged her chair closer; she leaned forward, hesitated again, waiting until the group had come within good viewing range, and pressed her lips to mine.

Though I was not in the least attracted to Alise, kissing her was a powerful sexual experience. It was a chaste kiss. Her lips trembled but did not part, and it lasted only a matter of seconds; yet for its duration, as if her mouth had been coated with some psychochemical, my senses sharpened to embrace the moment in microscopic detail. Kissing had always struck me as a blurred pleasure, a smashing together of pulpy flesh accompanied by a flurry of groping. But with Alise I could feel the exact conformation of our lips, the minuscule changes in pressure as they settled into place, the rough material of her blouse grazing my arm, the erratic measures of her breath (which was surprisingly sweet). The delicacy of the act aroused me as no other kiss had before, and when I drew back I half-expected her to have been transformed

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into a beautiful princess. Not so. She was as ever small and pale. Prettily ugly.

Stunned, I turned toward the beach. The expatriates were gauping at us, and their astonishment reoriented me. I gave them a cheery wave, put my arm around Alise and, inclining my head to hers in a pretense of young love, I led her into the house.

That night I went to sleep while she was off visiting Tom. I tried to station myself on the extreme edge of the bed, leaving her enough room to be comfortable; but by the time she returned, I had rolled onto the center of the mattress, and when she slipped in beside me, turning on her side, her thin buttocks cupped spoon-style by my groin, I came drowsily awake and realized that my erection was butting between her legs. Once again physical contact with her caused a sharpening of my senses — and due to the intimacy of the contact, my desire, too, was sharpened. I could no more have stopped myself than I could have stopped breathing. Gently, as gently as though she were the truest of trueloves — and, indeed, I felt that sort of tenderness toward her — I began moving against her, thrusting more and more forcefully until I had eased partway inside. All this time she had made no sound, no comment, but now she cocked her leg back over my hip, wriggled closer and let me penetrate her fully.

It had been a month since Anne had left, and I was undeniably horny; but not even this could explain the fervor of my performance that night. I lost track of how many times we made love. And yet we never exchanged endearments, never spoke or in any way acknowledged one another as lovers. Though Alise's breath quickened, her face remained set in that characteristic deadpan, and I wasn't sure if she was deriving pleasure from the act or simply providing a service, paying rent. It didn't matter. I was having enough fun for both of us. The last thing I recall is that she had mounted me, female superior, her skin glowing ghost-pale in the dawn light, single-scoop breasts barely jiggling; her charcoal eyes were fixed on the wall, as if she saw there an important destination toward which she was galloping me post-haste.

My romance with Alise — this, and the fact that she and Tom had taken to smoking vast amounts of kef and wandering the beach glassy-eyed, thus emulating the behavior of the other expatriates — had more or less the desired effect upon everyone . . . everyone except Richard Shockley. He accosted me on my way to work one morning and told me in no uncertain terms that if I knew what was good for me, I should break all ties with the twins. I had about three

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inches and thirty pounds on him, and — for reasons I will shortly explain — I was in an irascible mood; I gave him a push and asked him to keep out of my business or suffer the consequences.

"You stupid punk!" he said, but backed away.

"Punk?" I laughed — laughter has always been for me a spark to fuel rage — and followed him. "Come on, Rich. You can work up a better insult than that. A verbal guy like you. Come on! Give me a reason to get really crazy."

We were standing in one of the dusty streets back of the beach, not far from a bakery, a little shop with dozens of loaves of bread laid neatly in the window, and at that moment a member of the Guardia Civil poked his head out the door. He was munching a sweet roll, watching us with casual interest: a short, swarthy man, wearing an olive green uniform with fancy epaulets, an automatic rifle slung over his shoulder, and sporting one of those goofy patent leather hats. Shockley blanched at the sight, wheeled around, and walked away. I was about to walk away myself, but the guardsman beckoned. With a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, I went over to him.

"Cobarde," he said, gesturing at Shockley.

My Spanish was poor, but I knew that word: *coward.* "Yeah," I said. "In *inglés, cobarde* means chickenshit."

"Cheet-sheet," he said; then, more forcefully: "Cheek-sheet!"

He asked me to teach him some more English; he wanted to know all the curse words. His name was Francisco, he had fierce bad breath, and he seemed genuinely friendly. But I knew damn well that he was most likely trying to recruit me as an informant. He talked about his family in Seville, his girlfriend, now beautiful it was in Spain. I smiled, kept repeating, *"Sí, sí,"* and was very relieved when he had to go off on his rounds.

Despite Shockley's attitude, the rest of the expatriates began to accept the twins, lumping us together as weirdos of the most perverted sort, yet explicable in our weirdness. From Don Washington I learned that Tom, Alise, and I were thought to be involved in a ménage à trois, and when I attempted to deny this, he said it was no big thing. He did ask, however, what I saw in Alise; I gave some high school reply about it all being the same in the dark, but in truth I had no answer to his question. Since Alise had moved in, my life had assumed a distinct pattern. Each morning I would hurry off to Malaga to work on the movie set; each night I would return home and enter into brainless rut with Alise. I found this confusing. Separated from Alise, I felt only mild pity for her, yet her proximity would drive me into a lustful frenzy. I lost interest in writing, in Spain, in everything except Alise's undernourished

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body. I slept hardly at all, my temper worsened, and I began to wonder if she were a witch and had ensorcelled me. Often I would come home to discover her and Tom sitting stoned on my porch, the floor littered with sketches of those circuitlike designs (actually they less resembled circuits than a kind of mechanistic vegetation). I asked once what they were. "A game," replied Alise, and distracted me with a caress.

Two weeks after she moved in, I shouted at the assistant director of the movie (he had been instructing me on how to throw a wineskin with the proper degree of adulation as the English actor-matador paraded in triumph around the bullring) and was fired. After being hustled off the set, I vowed to get rid of Alise, whom I blamed for all my troubles. But when I arrived home, she was nowhere to be seen. I stumped over to Tom's house and pounded on the door. It swung open, and I peeked inside. Empty. Half a dozen notebooks were scattered on the floor. Curiosity overrode my anger. I stepped in and picked up a notebook.

The front cover was decorated with a hand-drawn swastika, and while it is not uncommon to find swastikas on notebook covers — they make for entertaining doodling — the sight of this one gave me a chill. I leafed through the pages, noticing that though the entries were in English, there were occasional words and phrases in German, these having question marks beside them; then I went back and read the first entry.

The Führer had been dead three days, and still no one had ventured into the office where he had been exposed to the poisoned blooms, although a servant had crawled along the ledge to the window and returned with the news that the corpse was stiffened in its leather tunic, its cheeks bristling with a dead man's growth, and strings of desiccated blood were hanging from its chin. But as we well remembered his habit of reviving the dead for a final bout of torture, we were afraid that he might have set an igniter in his cells to ensure rebirth, and so we waited while the wine in his goblet turned to vinegar and then to a murky gas that hid him from our view. Nothing had changed. The garden of hydrophobic roses fertilized with his blood continued to lash and slather, and the hieroglyphs of his shadow selves could be seen patrolling the streets. . . .

The entry went on in like fashon for several pages, depicting a magical-seeming Third Reich, ruled by a dead or moribund Hitler, policed by shadow men known collectively as The Disciples, and populated by a terrified citizenry. All the entries were similar in character, but in the margins were brief notations, most having to do with either Tom's or Alise's physical state, and one passage in particular caught my eye:

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. . .

Alise's control of her endocrine system continues to outpace mine. Could this simply be a product of male and female differences? It seems likely, since we have all else in common.

Endocrine? Didn't that have something to do with glands and secretions? and if so, couldn't this be a clue to Alise's seductive powers? I wished that old Mrs. Adkins (General Science, fifth period) had been more persevering with me. I picked up another notebook. No swastika on the cover, but on the foreleaf was written: "Tom and Alise, 'born' March 1944." The entire notebook contained a single entry, apparently autobiographical, and after checking out the window to see if the twins were in sight, I sat down to read it.

Five pages later I had become convinced that Tom was either seriously crazy or that he and Alise were the subjects of an insane Nazi experiment . . . or both. The word *clone* was not then in my vocabulary, but this was exactly what Tom claimed that he and Alise were. They, he said, along with eighteen others, had been grown from a single cell (donor unknown), part of an attempt to speed up development of a true Master Race. A successful attempt, according to him, for not only were the twenty possessed of supernormal physical and mental abilities, but they were stronger and more handsome than the run of humanity: this seemed to me wish fulfillment, pure and simple, and other elements of the story — for example, the continuation of an exotic Third Reich past 1945 — seemed delusion. But upon reading further, learning that they had been sequestered in a cave for almost twenty years, being educated by scientific personnel, I realized that Tom and Alise could have been told these things and have assumed their truth. One could easily make a case for some portion of the Reich having survived the war.

I was about to put down the notebook when I noticed several loose sheets of paper stuck in the rear; I pulled them out and unfolded them. The first appeared to be a map of part of a city, with a large central square labeled "Citadel," and the rest were covered in a neat script that — after reading a paragraph or two — I deduced to be Alise's.

Tom says that since I'm the only one ever to leave the caves (before we all finally left them, that is), I should set down my experiences. He seems to think that having even a horrid past is preferable to having none, and insists that we should document it as well as we can. For myself, I would like to forget the past, but I'll write down what I remember to satisfy his compulsiveness.

When we were first experimenting with the tunnel, we knew nothing more about it than that it

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was a metaphysical construct of some sort. Our control of it was poor and we had no idea how far it reached or through what medium it penetrated. Nor had we explored it to any great extent. It was terrifying. The only constant was that it was always dark, with fuzzy, different-colored lights shining at what seemed tremendous distances away. Often you would feel disembodied, and sometimes your body was painfully real, subject to odd twinges and shocks. Sometimes it was hard to move — like walking through black glue, and other times it was is if the darkness were a frictionless substance that squeezed you along faster than you wanted to go. Horrible afterimages materialized and vanished on all sides — monsters, animals, things to which I couldn't put a name. We were almost as frightened of the tunnel as we were of our masters. Almost.

One night after the guards had taken some the girls into their quarters, we opened the tunnel and three of us entered it. I was in the lead when our control slipped and the tunnel began to constrict. I started to turn back, and the next I knew I was standing under the sky, surrounded by windowless buildings. Warehouses, I think. The street was deserted, and I had no idea where I was. In a panic, I ran down the street and soon I heard the sounds of traffic. I turned a corner and stopped short. A broad avenue lined with gray buildings — all decorated with carved eagles — led away from where I stood and terminated in front of an enormous building of black stone. I recognized it at once from pictures we had been shown — Hitler's Citadel.

Though I was still very afraid, perhaps even more so, I realized that I had learned two things of importance. First, that no matter through what otherworldly medium it stretched, the tunnel also negotiated a worldly distance. Second, I understood that the portrait painted of the world by our masters was more or less accurate. We had never been sure of this, despite having been visited by Disciples and other of Hitler's creatures, their purpose being to frighten us into compliance.

I only stood a few minutes in that place, yet I'll never be able to forget it. No description could convey its air of menace, its oppressiveness. The avenue was thronged with people, all — like our guards — shorter and less attractive than I and my siblings, all standing stock-still, silent, and gazing at the Citadel. A procession of electric cars was passing through their midst, blowing horns, apparently to celebrate a triumph, because no one was obstructing their path. Several Disciples were prowling the fringes of the crowd, and overhead a huge winged shape was flying. It was no aircraft; its wings beat, and it swooped and soared like a live thing. Yet it must have been forty or fifty feet long. I couldn't make out what it was; it kept close to the sun, and therefore was always partly in silhouette. (I should mention that although the sun was at meridian, the sky was a deep blue such as I have come to associate with the late-afternoon skies of this world, and the sun itself was tinged with red, its globe well

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defined — I think it may have been farther along the path to dwarfism than the sun of this world.) All these elements contributed to the menace of the scene, but the dominant force was the Citadel. Unlike the other buildings, no carvings adorned it. No screaming eagles, no symbols of terror and war. It was a construct of simple curves and straight lines; but that simplicity implied an animal sleekness, communicated a sense of great power under restraint, and I had the feeling that at any moment the building might come alive and devour everyone within its reach. It seemed to give its darkness to the air.

I approached a man standing nearby and asked what was going on. He looked at me askance, then checked around to see if anyone was watching us. "Haven't you heard?" he said.

"I've been away," I told him.

This, I could see, struck him as peculiar, but he accepted the fact and said, "They thought he was coming back to life, but it was a false alarm. Now they're offering sacrifices."

The procession of cars had reached the steps of the Citadel, and from them emerged a number of people with their hands bound behind their backs, and a lesser number of very large men, who began shoving them up the steps toward the main doors. Those doors swung open, and from the depths of the Citadel issued a kind of growling music overlaid with fanfares of trumpets. A reddish glow — feeble at first, then brightening to a blaze — shone from within. The light and the music set my heart racing. I backed away, and as I did, I thought I saw a face forming in the midst of that red glow. Hitler's face, I believe. But I didn't wait to validate this. I ran, ran as hard as I could back to the street behind the warehouses, and there, to my relief, I discovered that the tunnel had once again been opened.

I leaned back, trying to compare what I had read with my knowledge of the twins. Those instances of silent communication. Telepathy? Alise's endocrinal control. Their habit of turning lamps on to burn away the night — could this be some residual behavior left over from cave life? Tom had mentioned that the lights had never been completely extinguished, merely dimmed. Was this all an elaborate fantasy he had concocted to obscure their pitiful reality? Whatever, I found that I was no longer angry at them, that they had been elevated in my thoughts from nuisance to mystery. Looking back, I can see that my new attitude was every bit as discriminatory as my previous one. I felt for them an adolescent avidity such as I might have exhibited toward a strange pet. They were neat, weird, with the freakish appeal of Venus's fly-traps and sea monkeys. Nobody else had one like them, and having them to myself made me feel superior. I would discover what sort of tricks they could perform; take notes on their peculiarities, and then, eventually growing

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bored, I'd move along to a more consuming interest. Though I was intelligent enough to understand that this attitude was — in its indulgence and lack of concern for others — typically ugly-American, I saw no harm in adopting it. Why, they might even benefit from my attention.

At that moment I heard voices outside. I skimmed the notebook toward the others on the floor and affected nonchalance. The door opened; they entered and froze upon seeing me. "Hi," I said. "Door was open, so I waited for you here. What have you been up to?"

Tom's eyes flicked to the notebooks, and Alise said, "We've been walking."

"Yeah?" I said this with great good cheer, as if pleased that they had been taking exercise. "Too bad I didn't get back earlier. I could have gone with you."

"Why *are* you back?" asked Tom, gathering the notebooks.

I didn't want to let on about the loss of my job, thinking that the subterfuge would give me a means of keeping track of them. "Some screw-up on the set," I told him. "They had to put off filming. What say we go into town?"

From that point on, no question I asked them was casual; I was always testing, probing, trying to ferret out some of their truth.

"Oh, I don't know," said Tom. "I thought I'd have a swim."

I took a mental note: Why do subjects exhibit avoidance of town? For an instant I had an unpleasant vision of myself, a teenage monster gloating over his two gifted white mice, but this was overborne by my delight in the puzzle they presented. "Yeah," I said breezily. "A swim would be nice."

That night making love with Alise was a whole new experience. I wasn't merely screwing; I was exploring the unknown, penetrating mystery. Watching her pale, passionless face, I imagined the brain behind it to be a strange, glowing jewel, with facets instead of convolutions. *National Enquirer* headlines flashed through my head. Nazi Mutants Alive in Spain. American Teen Uncovers Hitler's Secret Plot. Of course there would be no such publicity. Even if Tom's story were true — and I was far from certain that it was — I had no intention of betraying them. I wasn't that big a jerk.

For the next month I maintained the illusion that I was still employed by the film company, and left home each morning at dawn; but rather than catching the bus into Malaga, I would hide between the houses, and as soon as Tom and Alise went off on one of their walks (they always walked west along the beach, vanishing behind a rocky point), I would sneak into Tom's house and continue investigating the notebooks. The more I read, the more firmly I believed the

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story. There was a flatness to the narrative tone that reminded me of a man I had heard speaking about the concentration camps, dully recounting atrocities, staring into space, as if the things he said were putting him into a trance. For example:

. . . It was on July 2nd that they came for Urduja and Klaus. For the past few months, they had been making us sleep together in a room lit by harsh fluorescents. There were no mattresses, no pillows, and they took our clothes so we could not use them as covering. It was like day under those trays of white light, and we lay curled around each other for warmth. They gassed us before they entered, but we had long since learned how to neutralize the gas, and so we were all awake, linked, pretending to be asleep. Three of them came into the room, and three more stood at the door with guns. At first it seemed that this would be just another instance of rape. The three men violated Urduja one after the other. She kept up her pretense of unconsciousness, but she felt everything. We tried to comfort her, sending out our love and encouragement. But I could sense her hysteria, her pain. They were rough with her, and when they had finished, her thighs were bloody. She was very brave and gave no cry; she was determined not to give us away. Finally they picked her and Klaus up and carried them off. An hour later we felt them die. It was horrible, as if part of my mind had short-circuited, a corner of it left forever dim.

We were angry and confused. Why would they kill what they had worked so hard to create? Some of us, Uwe and Peter foremost among them, wanted to give up the tunnel and revenge ourselves as best we could; but the rest of us managed to calm things down. Was it revenge we wanted, we asked, or was it freedom? If freedom was to be our choice, then the tunnel was our best hope. Would I — I wonder — have lobbied so hard for the tunnel if I had known that only Alsie and I would survive it?"

The story ended shortly before the escape attempt was to be made; the remainder of the notebooks contained further depictions of that fantastic Third Reich — genetically created giants who served as executioners, fountains of blood in the squares of Berlin, dogs that spoke with human voices and spied for the government — and also marginalia concerning the twins' abilities, among them being the control of certain forms of energy: these particular powers had apparently been used to create the tunnel. All this fanciful detail unsettled me, as did several elements of the story. Tom had stated that the usual avenues of escape had been closed to the twenty clones, but what was a tunnel if not a usual avenue of escape? Once he had mentioned that the tunnel was "unstable." What did that mean? And he seemed to imply that the escape had not yet been effected.

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By the time I had digested the notebooks, I had begun to notice the regular pattern of the twins' walks; they would disappear around the point that bounded the western end of the beach, and then, a half hour later, they would return, looking worn-out. Perhaps, I thought, they were doing something there that would shed light on my confusion, and so one morning I decided to follow them.

The point was a spine of blackish rock shaped like a lizard's tail that extended about fifty feet out into the water. Tom and Alise would always wade around it. I, however, scrambled up the side and lay flat like a sniper atop it. From my vantage I overlooked a narrow stretch of gravelly shingle, a little trough scooped out between the point and low, brown hills that rolled away inland. Tom and Alise were sitting ten or twelve feet below, passing a kef pipe, coughing, exhaling billows of smoke.

That puzzled me. Why would they come here just to get high? I scrunched into a more comfortable position. It was a bright, breezy day; the sea was heaving with a light chop, but the waves slopping onto the shingle were ripples. A few fishing boats were herding a freighter along the horizon. I turned my attention back to the twins. They were standing, making peculiar gestures that reminded me of T'ai Chi, though these were more labored.

Then I noticed that the air above the tidal margin had become distorted as with a heat haze . . . yet it was not hot in the least. I stared at the patch of distorted air — it was growing larger and larger — and I began to see odd translucent shapes eddying within it: they were similar to the shapes that the twins were always sketching. There was a funny pressure in my ears; a drop of sweat slid down the hollow of my throat, leaving a cold track.

Suddenly the twins broke off gesturing and leaned against each other; the patch of distorted air misted away. The twins were breathing heavily, obviously exhausted. They sat down a couple of feet from the water's edge, and after a long silence Tom said, "We should try again to be certain."

"Why don't we finish it now?" said Alise. "I'm so tired of this place."

"It's too dangerous in the daylight," Tom shied a pebble out over the water. "If they're waiting at the other end, we might have to run. We'll need the darkness for cover."

"What about tonight?"

"I'd rather wait until tomorrow night. There's supposed to be a storm front coming, and nobody will be outside."

Alise sighed.

"What's wrong?" Tom asked. "Is it Lucius?"

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I listened with even more intent.

"No," she said. "I just want it to be over."

Tom nodded and gazed out to sea. The freighter looked to have moved a couple of inches eastward; gulls were flying under the sun, becoming invisible as they passed across its glaring face, and then swooping away like bit of winged matter blown from its core. Tom picked up the kef pipe. "Let's try it again," he said.

At that instant someone shouted, "Hey!" Richard Shockley came striding down out of the hills behind the shingle. Tom and Alise got to their feet. "I can't believe you people are so fucking uncool," said Shockley, walking up to them; his face was dark with anger, and the breeze was lashing his hair, as if it, too, were enraged. "What the hell are you trying to do? Get everyone busted?"

"We're not doing anything," said Alise.

"Naw!" sneered Shockley. "You're just breaking the law in plain view. Plain fucking view!" His fists clenched, and I thought for a moment he was going to hit them. They were so much smaller than he that they looked like children facing an irate parent.

"You won't have to be concerned with us much longer," said Tom. "We're leaving soon."

"Good," said Shockley. "That's real good. But lemme tell you something, man. I catch you smoking out here again, and you might be leaving quicker than you think."

"What do you mean?" asked Alise.

"Don't you worry about what I fucking mean," said Shockley. "You just watch your behavior. We had a good scene going here until you people showed up, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let you blow it." He snatched the pipe from Tom's hand and slung it out to sea. He shook his finger in Tom's face. "I swear, man! One more fuckup, and I'll be on you like white on rice!" Then he stalked off around the point.

As soon as he was out of sight, without a word exchanged between them, Tom and Alise waded into the water and began groping beneath the surface, searching for the pipe. To my amazement, because the shallows were murky and full of floating litter, they found it almost instantly.

I was angry at Shockley, both for his treatment of the twins and for his invasion of what I considered my private preserve, and I headed toward his house to tell him to lay off. When I entered I was greeted by a skinny, sandy-haired guy — Skipper by name — who was sprawled on pillows in the front room; from the refuse of candy wrappers, crumpled cigarette

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packs, and empty pop bottles surrounding him, I judged him to have been in this position for quite some time. He was so opiated that he spoke in mumbles and he could scarcely open his eyes, but from him I learned the reason for Shockley's outburst. "You don't wanna see him now, man," said Skipper, and flicked out his tongue to retrieve a runner of drool that had leaked from the corner of his mouth. "Dude's on a rampage, y'know?"

"Yeah," I said. "I know."

"Fucker's paranoid," said Skipper. "Be paranoid myself if I was holding a key of smack."

"Heroin?"

"King H," said Skipper with immense satisfaction, as if pronouncing the name of his favorite restaurant, remembering past culinary treats, "He's gonna run it up to Copenhagen soon as—"

"Shut the hell up!" It was Shockley, standing in the front door. "Get out," he said to me.

"Be a pleasure." I strolled over to him. "The twins are leaving tomorrow night. Stay off their case."

He squared his shoulders, trying to be taller. "Or what?"

"Gee, Rich," I said. "I'd hate to see anything get in the way of your mission to Denmark."

Though in most areas of experience I was a neophyte compared to Shockley, he was just a beginner compared to me as regarded fighting. I could tell a punch was coming from the slight widening of his eyes, the tensing of his shoulders. It was a silly, schoolgirlish punch. I stepped inside it, forced him against the wall, and jammed my forearm under his chin. "Listen, Rich," I said mildly. "Nobody wants trouble with the Guardia, right?" My hold prevented him from speaking, but he nodded. Spit bubbled between his teeth. "Then there's no problem. You leave the twins alone, and I'll forget about the dope. O.K.?" Again he nodded. I let him go, and he slumped to the floor, holding his throat. "See how easy things go when you just sit down and talk about them?" I said, and grinned. He glared at me. I gave him a cheerful wink and walked off along the beach.

I see now that I credited Shockley with too much wisdom; I assumed that he was an expert smuggler and would maintain a professional calm. I underestimated his paranoia and gave no thought to his reasons for dealing with a substance as volatile as heroin: they must have involved a measure of desperation, because he was not a man prone to taking whimsical risks. But I wasn't thinking about the consequences of my actions. After what I had seen earlier beyond the point, I believed that I had figured

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out what Tom and Alise were up to. It seemed implausible, yet equally inescapable. And if I was right, this was my chance to witness something extraordinary. I wanted nothing to interfere.

Gray clouds blew in the next morning from the east, and a steady downpour hung a silver beaded curtain from the eaves of my porch. I spent the day pretending to write and watching Alise out of the corner of my eye. She went about her routines, washing the dishes, straightening up, sketching — the sketching was done with a bit more intensity than usual. Finally, late that afternoon having concluded that she was not going to tell me she was leaving, I sat down beside her at the table and initiated a conversation. "You ever read science fiction?" I asked.

"No," she said, and continued sketching.

"Interesting stuff. Lots of weird ideas. Time travel, aliens. . . ." I jiggled the table, causing her to look up, and fixed her with a stare. "Alternate worlds."

She tensed but said nothing.

"I've read your notebooks," I told her.

"Tom thought you might have." She closed the sketchpad.

"And I saw you trying to open the tunnel yesterday. I know that you're leaving."

She fingered the edge of the pad. I couldn't tell if she was nervous or merely thinking.

I kept after her. "What I can't figure out is *why* you're leaving. No matter who's chasing you, this world can't be as bad as the one described in the notebooks. At least we don't have anything like The Disciples."

"You've got it wrong," she said after a silence. "The Disciples are of my world."

I had more or less deduced what she was admitting to, but I hadn't really been prepared to accept that it was true, and for a moment I retrenched, believing again that she was crazy, that she had tricked me into swallowing her craziness as fact. She must have seen this in my face or read my thoughts, because she said then, "It's the truth."

"I don't understand," I said. "Why are you going back?"

"We're not; we're going to collapse the tunnel, and to do that we have to activate it. It took all of us to manage it before; Tom and I wouldn't have been able to see the configurations clearly enough if it hadn't been for your drugs. We owe you a great deal." A worry line creased her brow. "You mustn't spy on us tonight. It could be dangerous."

"Because someone might be waiting," I said. "The Disciples?"

She nodded. "We think one followed us into the tunnel and was trapped. It apparently can't control the fields involved in the tunnel, but if it's nearby when we activate the opening. . . ." She shrugged.

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"What'll you do if it is?"

"Lead it away from the beach," she said.

She seemed assured in this, and I let the topic drop. "What are they, anyway?" I asked.

"Hitler once gave a speech in which he told us they were magical reproductions of his soul. Who knows? They're horrid enough for that to be true."

"If you collapse the tunnel, then you'll be safe from pursuit. Right?"

"Yes."

"Then why leave Pedregalejo?"

"We don't fit in," she said, and let the words hang in the air a few seconds. "Look at me. Can you believe that in my world I'm considered beautiful?"

An awkward silence ensued. Then she smiled. I'd never seen her smile before. I can't say it made her beautiful — her skin looked dead-pale in the dreary light, her features asexual — but in the smile I could detect the passive confidence with which beauty encounters the world. It was the first time I had perceived her as a person and not as a hobby, a project.

"But that's not the point," she went on. "There's somewhere we want to go."

"Where?"

She reached into her airline bag, which was beside the chair, and pulled out a dog-eared copy of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. "To find the people who understand this."

I scoffed. "You believe that crap?"

"What would you know?" she snapped. "It's chaos inside the tunnel. It's. . . ." She waved her hand in disgust, as if it weren't worth explaining anything to such an idiot.

"Tell me about it," I said. Her anger had eroded some of my skepticism.

"If you've read the notebooks, you've seen my best attempt at telling about it. Ordinary referents don't often apply inside the tunnel. But it appears to pass by places described in this book. You catch glimpses of lights, and you're drawn to them. You seem to have an innate understanding that the lights are the entrances to worlds, and you sense that they're fearsome. But you're afraid that if you don't stop at one of them, you'll be killed. The others let themselves be drawn. Tom and I kept going. This light, this world, felt less fearsome than the rest." She gave a doleful laugh. "Now I'm not so sure."

"In one of the notebooks," I said, "Tom wrote that the others didn't survive."

"He doesn't really know," she said. "Perhaps he wrote that to make himself feel better about having wound up here. That would be like him."

We continued talking until dark. It was the longest time I had spent in her company without making love, and yet — because of this abstinence — we were more lovers then than we had ever been before. I listened to

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her not with an eye toward collecting data, but with genuine interest, and though everything she told me about her world smacked of insanity, I believed her. There were, she said, rivers that sprang from enormous crystals, birds with teeth, bats as large as eagles, cave cities, wizards, winged men who inhabited the thin Andean air. It was a place of evil grandeur, and at its heart, its ruler, was the dead Hitler, his body uncorrupting, his death a matter of conjecture, his terrible rule maintained by a myriad of servants in hopes of his rebirth.

At the time, Alise's world seemed wholly alien to me, as distinct from our own as Jupiter or Venus. But now I wonder if — at least in the manner of its rule — it is not much the same: Are we not also governed by the dead, by the uncorrupting laws they have made, laws whose outmoded concepts enforce a logical tyranny upon a populace that no longer meets their standards of morality? And I wonder further if each alternate world (Alise told me they were infinite in number) is but a distillation of the one adjoining, and if somewhere at the heart of this complex lies a compacted essence of a world, a blazing point of pure principle that plays cosmic Hitler to its shadow selves.

The storm that blew in just after dark was — like the Mediterranean — an age-worn elemental. Distant thunder, a few strokes of lightning spreading glowing cracks down the sky, a blustery wind. Alise cautioned me again against following her, and told me she'd be back to say goodbye. I told her I'd wait, but as soon as she and Tom had left, I set out toward the point. I would no more have missed their performance than I would have turned down, say, a free ticket to see the Rolling Stones. A few drops of rain were falling, but a foggy moon was visible through high clouds inland. Shadows were moving in the lighted windows of the houses; shards of atonal jazz alternated with mournful gusts of wind.

Once Tom and Alise glanced back, and I dropped flat in the mucky sand, lying flat until they had waded around the point. By the time I reached the top of the rocks, the rain had stopped. Directly below me were two shadows and the glowing coal of the kef pipe. I was exhilarated. I wished my father were there so I could say to him, "All your crap about 'slow and steady wins the race,' all your rationalist bullshit, it doesn't mean anything in the face of this. There's mystery in the world, and if I'd stayed in school, I'd never have known it."

I was so caught up in thinking about my father's reactions that I lost track of Tom and Alise. When I looked down again, I found that they had taken a stand by the shore and were performing those odd, graceful gestures. Just beyond them, its lowest edge level with the water, was a patch of darkness blacker than night, rough-

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ly circular, and approximately the size of a circus ring. Lightning was still striking down out to sea, but the moon had sailed clear of the clouds, staining silver the surrounding hilltops, bringing them close, and in that light I could see that the patch of darkness had depth . . . depth, and agitated motion. Staring into it was like staring into a fire while hallucinating, watching the flames adopt the forms of monsters; only in this case there were no flames but the vague impressions of monstrous faces melting up from the tunnel walls, showing a shinier black, then fading. I was at an angle to the tunnel, and while I could see inside it, I could also see that it had no exterior walls, that it was a hole hanging in midair, leading to an unearthly distance. Every muscle in my body was clenched, pressure was building in my ears, and I heard a static hiss overriding the grumble of thunder and the mash of the waves against the point.

My opinion of the twins had gone up another notch. Anyone who would enter that fuming nothingness was worthy of respect. They looked the image of courage: two pale children daring the darkness to swallow them. They kept on with their gestures until the depths of the tunnel began to pulse like a black gulping throat. The static hiss grew louder, oscillating in pitch, and the twins tipped their heads to the side, admiring their handiwork.

Then a shout in Spanish, a beam of light probing at the twins from the seaward reach of the point.

Seconds later Richard Shockley splashed through the shallows and onto shore; he was holding a flashlight, and the wind was whipping his hair. Behind him came a short, dark-skinned man carrying an automatic rifle, wearing the hat and uniform of the Guardia Civil. As he drew near I recognized him to be Francisco, the guardsman who had tried to cozy up to me. He had a Band-Aid on his chin, which — despite his weapon and traditions — made him seem an innocent.

The two men's attention was fixed on the twins, and they didn't notice the tunnel, though they passed close to its edge. Francisco began to harangue the twins in Spanish, menacing them with his gun.

I crept nearer and heard the word *heroína*. Heroin. I managed to hear enough to realize what had happened. Shockley, either for the sake of vengeance or — more likely — panicked by what he considered a threat to his security, had planted heroin in Tom's house and informed on him, hoping perhaps to divert suspicion and ingratiate himself with the Guardia. Alise was denying the charges, but Francisco was shouting her down.

And then he caught sight of the tunnel. His mouth fell open and he backed against the rocks directly beneath me.

Shockley spotted it, too. He shined

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his flashlight into the tunnel, and the beam was sheared off where it entered the blackness, as if it had been bitten in half. For a moment they were frozen in a tableau. Only the moonlight seemed in motion, coursing along Francisco's patent leather hat.

What got into me then was not bravery or any analogue thereof, but a sudden violent impulse such as had often landed me in trouble. I jumped feet first onto Francisco's back. I heard a grunt as we hit the ground, a snapping noise, and the next I knew I was scrambling off him, reaching for his gun, which had flown a couple of yards away. I had no clue of how to operate the safety or even of where it was located. But Shockley wasn't aware of that. His eyes were popped, and he sidled along the rocks toward the water, his head twitching from side to side, searching for a way out.

Hefting the cold, slick weight of the gun gave me a sense of power — a feeling tinged with hilarity — and as I came to my feet, aiming at Shockley's chest, I let out a purposefully demented laugh. "Tell me, Rich," I said. "Do you believe in God?"

He held out a hand palm-up and said, "Don't," in a choked voice.

"Remember that garbage you used to feed me about the moral force of poetry?" I said. "How you figure that jibes with setting up these two?" I waved the rifle barrel at the twins; they were staring into the tunnel, unmindful of me and Shockley.

"You don't understand," said Shockley.

"Sure I do, Rich." I essayed another deranged-teenage-killer laugh. "You're not a nice guy."

In the moonlight his face looked glossy with sweat. "Wait a minute," he said. "I'll. . . ."

Then Alise screamed, and I never did learn what Shockley had in mind. I spun around and was so shocked that I nearly dropped the gun. The tunnel was still pulsing, its depths shrinking and expanding like the gullet of a black worm, and in front of it stood a . . . my first impulse is to say "a shadow," but that description would not do justice to the Disciple. To picture it you must imagine the mold of an androgynous human body constructed from a material of such translucency that you couldn't see it under any condition of light; then you must further imagine that the mold contains a black substance (negatively black) that shares the properties of both gas and fluid, which is slipping around inside, never filling the mold completely — at one moment presenting to you a knife-edge, the next a frontal silhouette, and at other times displaying all the other possible angles of attitude, shifting among them. Watching it made me dizzy. Tom and Alise cowered from it, and when it turned full face to me, I, too, cowered. Red, glowing pinpricks appeared in the places where

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its eyes should have been; the pinpricks swelled, developing into real eyes. The pupils were black planets eclipsing bloody suns.

I wanted to run, but those eyes held me. Insanity was like a heat in them. They radiated fury, loathing, hatred, and I wonder now if anything human, even some perverted fraction of mad Hitler's soul, could have achieved such an alien resolve. My blood felt as thick as syrup, my scrotum tightened. Then something splashed behind me, and though I couldn't look away from the eyes, I knew that Shockley had run. The Disciple moved after him. And how it moved! It was as if it were turning sideways and vanishing, repeating the process over and over, and doing this so rapidly that it seemed to be strobing, winking in and out of existence, each wink transporting it several feet farther along. Shockley never had a chance. It was too dark out near the end of the point for me to tell what really happened, but I saw two shadows merge and heard a bubbling scream.

A moment later the Disciple came whirling back toward the shore.

Instinctively I clawed the trigger of Franscisco's gun — the safety had not been on. Bullets stitched across the Disciple's torso, throwing up geysers of blackness that almost instantly were reabsorbed into its body, as if by force of gravity. Otherwise they had no effect. The Disciple stopped just beyond arm's reach, nailing me with its burning gaze, flickering with the rhythm of a shadow cast by a fire. Only its eyes were constant, harrowing me.

Someone shouted — I think it was Tom, but I'm not sure; I had shrunk so far within myself that every element of the scene except the glowing red eyes had a dim value. Abruptly the Disciple moved away. Tom was standing at the mouth of the tunnel. When the Disciple had come half the distance toward him, he took a step forward and — like a man walking into a black mirror — disappeared.

The Disciple sped into the tunnel after him. For a time I could see their shapes melting up and fading among the other, more monstrous shapes.

A couple of minutes after they had entered it, the tunnel collapsed. Accompanied by a keening hiss, the interior walls constricted utterly and flecks of ebony space flew up from the mouth. Night flowed in to take its place. Alise remained standing by the shore, staring at the spot where the tunnel had been. In a daze, I walked over and put an arm around her shoulder, wanting to comfort her. But she shook me off and went a few steps into the water, as if to say that she would rather drown than accept my consolation.

My thoughts were in chaos, and needing something to focus them, I knelt beside Francisco, who was still lying facedown. I turned him onto his

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back, and his head turned with a horrid, grating sound. Blood and sand crusted his mouth. He was dead, his neck broken. For a long while I sat there, noticing the particulars of death, absorbed by them: how the blood within him had begun to settle to one side, discoloring his cheek/ how his eyes, though glazed, had maintained a bewildered look. The Band-Aid on his chin had come unstuck, revealing a shaving nick. I might have sat there forever, hypnotized by the sight; but then a bank of clouds overswept the moon, and the pitch-darkness shocked me, alerted me to the possible consequences of what I had done.

From that point on I was operating in a kind of luminous panic, inspired by fear to acts of survival. I dragged Francisco's body into the hills; I waded into the water and found Shockley's body floating in the shallows. Every inch of his skin was horribly charred, and as I hauled him to his resting place beside Francisco, black flakes came away on my fingers. After I had covered the bodies with brush, I led Alise — by then unresisting — back to the house, packed for us both, and hailed a taxi for the airport. There I had a moment of hysteria, realizing that she would not have a passport. But she did. A Canadian one, forged in Malaga. We boarded the midnight flight to Casablanca, and the next day — because I was still fearful of pursuit — we began hitchhiking east across the desert.

Our travels were arduous. I had only three hundred dollars, and Alise had none. Tom's story about their having valuables to sell had been more or less true, but in our haste we had left them behind. In Cairo, partly due to our lack of funds and partly to medical expenses incurred by Alise's illness (amoebic dysentery), I was forced to take a job. I worked for a perfume merchant in the Khan el-Khalili Bazaar, steering tourists to his shop, where they could buy rare essences and drugs and change money at the black market rates. In order to save enough to pay our passage east, I began to cheat my employer, servicing some of his clients myself — and when he found me out, I had to flee with Alise, who had not yet shaken her illness.

I felt responsible for her, guilty about my role in the proceedings. I'd come to terms with Francisco's death. Naturally I regretted it, and sometimes I would see that dark, surprised face in my dreams. But acts of violence did not trouble my heart then as they do now. I had grown up violent in a violent culture, and I was able to rationalize the death as an accident. And, too, it had been no saint I had killed.

I could not, however, rationalize my guilt concerning Alise, and this confounded me. Hadn't I tried to save

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her and Tom? I realized that my actions had essentially been an expression of adolescent fury, yet they had been somewhat on the twins' behalf. And no one could have stood against the Disciple. What more could I have done? Nothing, I told myself. But this answer failed to satisfy me.

In Afghanistan, Alise suffered a severe recurrence of her dysentery. This time I had sufficient funds (money earned by smuggling, thanks to Shockley's lessons) to avoid having to work, and we rented a house on the outskirts of Kabul. We lived there three months, until she had regained her health. I fed her yogurt, red meat, vegetables; I bought her books and a tape recorder and music to play on it; I brought people in whom I thought she might be interested to visit her.

I wish I could report that we grew to be friends, but she had withdrawn into herself and thus remained a mystery to me, something curious and inexplicable. She would lie in her room — a cubicle of white washed stone — with the sunlight slanting in across her bed, paling her further, transforming her into a piece of ivory sculpture, and would gaze out the window for hours, seeing, I believe, not the exotic traffic on the street —robed horsemen from the north, ox-drawn carts, and Chinese-made trucks — but some otherworldly vista. Often I wanted to ask her more about her world, about the tunnel and Tom and a hundred other things. But while I could not institute a new relationship with her, I did not care to reinstitute our previous one. And so my questions went unasked. And so certain threads of this narrative must be left untied, reflecting the messiness of reality as opposed to the neatness of fiction.

Though this story is true, I do not ask that you believe it. To my mind it is true enough, and if you have read it to the end, then you have sufficiently extended your belief. In any case, it is a verity that the truth becomes a lie when it is written down, and it is the art of writing to wring as much truth as possible from its own dishonest fabric. I have but a single truth to offer, one that came home to me on the last day I saw Alise, one that stands outside both the story and the act of writing it.

We had reached the object of our months-long journey, the gates of a Tibetan nunnery on a hill beneath Dhaulagiri in Nepal, a high blue day with a chill wind blowing. It was here that Alise planned to stay. Why? She never told me more than she had in our conversation shortly before she and Tom set out to collapse the tunnel. The gates — huge wooden barriers carved with the faces of gods — swung open, and the female lamas began to applaud, their way of frightening off demons who might try to enter. They formed a crowd of yellow robes and tanned, smiling faces that seemed to me another kind of barri-

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er, a deceptively plain facade masking some rarefied contentment. Alise and I had said a perfunctory good-bye, but as she walked inside, I thought —I hoped — that she would turn back and give vent to emotion.

She did not. The gates swung shut, and she was gone into the only haven that might accept her as commonplace.

Gone, and I had never really known her.

I sat down outside the gates, alone for the first time in many months, with no urgent destination or commanding purpose, and took stock. High above, the snowy fang of Dhaulagiri reared against a cloudless sky; its sheer faces depended to gentler slopes seamed with the ice-blue tongues of glaciers, and those slopes eroded into barren brown hills such as the one upon which the nunnery was situated. That was half the world.

The other half, the half I faced, was steep green hills terraced into barley fields, and winding through them a river, looking as unfeatured as a shiny aluminum ribbon. Hawks were circling the middle distance, and somewhere, perhaps from the monastery that I knew to be off among the hills, a horn sounded a great bass note like a distant dragon signaling its hunger or its rage.

I sat at the center of these events and things, at the dividing line of these half-worlds that seemed to me less in opposition than equally empty, and I felt that emptiness pouring into me. I was so empty, I thought that if the wind were to strike me at the correct angle, I might chime like a bell . . . and perhaps it did, perhaps the clarity of the Himalayan weather and this sudden increment of emptiness acted to produce a tone, an illumination, for I saw myself then as Tom and Alise must have seen me. Brawling, loutish, indulgent. The two most notable facts of my life were negatives: I had killed a man, and I had encountered the unknown and let it elude me. I tried once again to think what more I could have done, and this time, rather than arriving at the usual conclusion, I started to understand what lesson I had been taught on the beach at Pedregalejo.

Some years ago a friend of mine, a writer and a teacher of writing, told me that my stories had a tendency to run on past the climax, and that I frequently ended them with a moral, a technique he considered outmoded. He was, in the main, correct. But it occurs to me that sometimes a moral — whether or not clearly stated by the prose — is what provides us with the real climax, the good weight that makes the story resonate beyond the measure of the page. So, in this instance, I will go contrary to my friend's advice and tell you what I learned, because it strikes me as being particularly applicable to the American consciousness, which is insulated from much painful reality,

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and further because it relates to a process of indifference that puts us all at risk.

When the tragedies of others become for us diversions, sad stories with which to enthrall our friends, interesting bits of data to toss out at cocktail parties, a means of presenting a pose of political concern, or whatever . . . when this happens we commit the gravest of sins, condemn ourselves to ignominy, and consign the world to a dangerous course. We begin to justify our casual overview of pain and suffering by portraying ourselves as do-gooders incapacitated by the inexorable forces of poverty, famine, and war. "What can I do?" we say. "I'm only one person, and these things are beyond my control. I care about the world's trouble, but there are no solutions."

Yet no matter how accurate this assessment, most of us are relying on it to be true, using it to mask our indulgence, our deep-seated lack of concern, our pathological self-involvement. In adopting this attitude we delimit the possibilities for action by letting events progress to a point at which, indeed, action becomes impossible, at which we can righteously say that nothing can be done. And so we are born, we breed, we are happy, we are sad, we deal with consequential problems of our own, we have cancer or a car crash, and in the end our actions prove insignificant. Some will tell you that to feel guilt or remorse over the vast inaction of our society is utter foolishness; life, they insist, is patently unfair, and all anyone can do is to look out for his own interests. Perhaps they are right; perhaps we are so mired in our self-conceptions that we can change nothing. Perhaps this is the way of the world. But, for the sake of my soul and because I no longer wish to hide my sins behind a guise of mortal incapacity, I tell you it is not.

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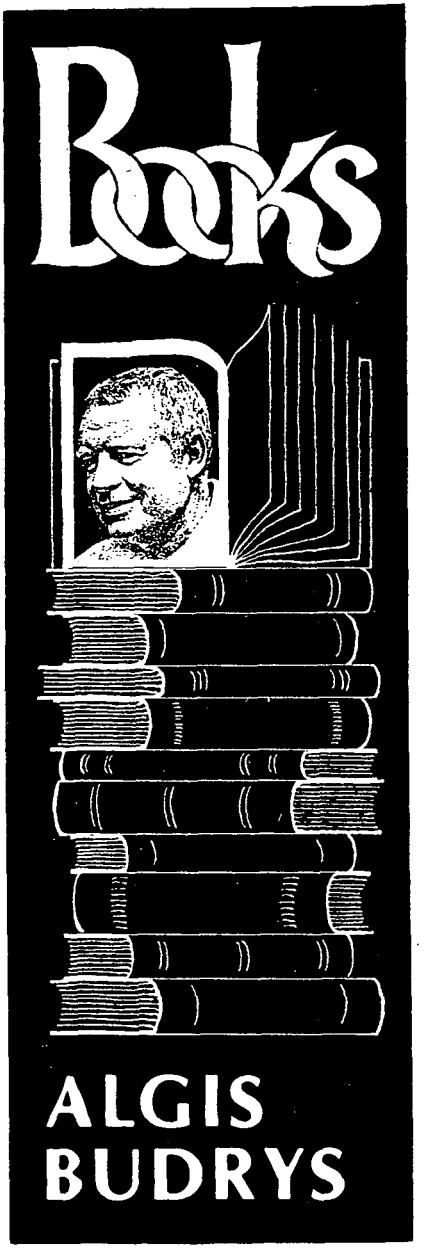

Become The Hunted, Jefferson P. Swycaffer, Avon, $2.95

Birds of Prey, David Drake, Tor, $2.95

The Man Who Never Missed, Steve Perry, Ace, $2.95

Meanwhile, Max Handley, Popular Library/Questar, $3.50

Much of SF is political science fiction or fantasy. Often, we don't think about it that way. We think it's about the king's dispossessed heir and the quest for the talisman, or the poor bastard on the run after stumbling over some hidden aspect of the multinational corporation that employs him. But if you stop to recall that western stories are about who's going to control the valley, and crime stories are about who's going to control the city; that sports stories are about gaining the adulation of the crowd, and that war stories are war stories, you rapidly recall that humankind is a political animal. And I hope you recall that speculative fiction is definable as drama made more relevant by social extrapolation.

What that means is that when SF adopts genre forms in imitation of other newsstand-borne fictions, it is not a pale shadow; it is the most intensive case. Its social settings are not restricted to known milieux, its cultural behaviors need not be conventional in any sense, and, most important, the resources available to its protagonists can be extraordinary. Just looking at how many stories of what

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kind are steadily published, the impression grows and grows that the major appeal of SF lies in its ability to explore the absolute ramifications of personal power.

Despite their invention of such milieu-expanders as the "Timeless West" and the generic city, other fictions are restricted by the undeniable existence of what might be called "patent reality" — what "everybody knows" is possible in life as we know it. Speculative fiction can go at least as far as what everybody hopes is possible.

There are any number of fiction-readers who are patently anchored to the heres-and-nows of human experience. For western reader Dwight D. Eisenhower, a Colt's hogleg slung at the Levi-clad hip was all the equalizer his psyche wanted to accommodate; for John F. Kennedy, James Bond fan, it was a slim but mechanically intricate Walther PPK snug in a shoulder holster. And that's just as well, at least for persons who are themselves doomed to play hero in a patent world, formulating and promulgating just the one lifeplan.

But SF delves differently. Its readers rarely do precinct work. Most do not want patent power — that would interfere with their freedom to be fascinated with power as a concept. The less it has to do with the obvious here and now, the better. As selflessly as any philanthropic foundation, they support pure research, habitually most rewarding those writers who most often cast up power in ever-inventive detail against fresh suppositional backgrounds.

We cannot all be Heinlein or Herbert, of course — speaking, incidentally, of people who have readily done precinct work and/or its equivalents. Nor do all SF writers try to do what such people must do, which is to each time produce a book that the audience will consider worthy of its first-rank byline. Most of us are free to just do an honest, workmanlike job if so minded.

It's the honest, workmanlike jobs that tell the most about what's going on in a literature. They're not trying to set a trend, but on the other hand they're not somebody's idiosyncrasy hatched in an ivory tower, perhaps gloriously and statistically irrelevant. So it struck me as potentially interesting that a great and perhaps increasing proportion of workmanlike science fiction being published these days, especially in paperback, is overt political science in an action format. Consequently turning to the stack of new books that accumulate beside my living room chair like so many bricks in an endlessly remodelled structure, I picked what looked like a random sample of four, and here my reactions are in alphabetical order by title:

Jefferson P. Swycaffer I take to be a young man. *Become the Hunted* is

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his second novel. He says its chronology precedes that of *Not in Our Stars*, his first, which is set in the same universe.

It's the universe of many another writer, including C. S. Forester; a universe of far-flung navies and Navy persons operating in response to the Byzantine policies of a distant and endlessly recomplicated central bureaucracy. In the present example, there's a central governmental concept called The Concordat, which may be an entity or may be a document, but the Navy itself is ramified and compartmented enough to contain the same good old story.

The story revolves around the honest bureaucrat who stumbles over the evidence that one power-hungry admiral deliberately sent another's fleet to its death. Reporting this where the first admiral could overhear, he has been framed for the disaster and is now being hounded to his death. Trapped at the focus of limitless hostile resources and shadowy conspiracies, what can one man do to not only save his own neck but bring down the miscreants? And so Athalos Steldan plummets past us on the opening pages, going to ground with false papers on a backwater planet. Perhaps he has a plan, perhaps not. Quite soon he becomes involved with a picturesque criminal element, a female bounty-hunter, and Naval personnel of various degrees of honesty, doing a great deal of jumping and running meanwhile. Lots of walls get knocked down, and quite a few people get shot.

If you like this kind of thing, you will find nothing exceptionable in Swycaffer's version of it. He's literate and generally proficient at constructing the individual scenes and stringing them together. He also does nothing to startle, which in this sort of case is a species of virtue; you will get what you thought you were paying for. . . fast action, skullduggery plotted and skullduggery circumvented, a certain amount of intersexual romance, and hairsbreadth escapes. Finally in this case you will get the revelation that mastering a lot of data, applying it ingeniously and unflinchingly at the proper moment, will bring you out on top in the end. This is one of the standard revelations in this genre, and so you have nothing to object to.

Poul Anderson, it was said to me by James Blish, once described a horse as that creature which occupies the space that would otherwise be taken up by another horse. Something on that order is certainly true of ***Become the Hunted***, and this ought to be called to Swycaffer's attention, for approximately three reasons.

One, this story does not in fact advance the research. It will sell only to those who want the mixture exactly as before. While such people usually form the majority in any population, they will treat you like any

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other tradesman. If you expect anything more than that out of the SF community, you are going to have to do more than that.

Two, actually, *Become the Hunted* does a little less than that. It is above minimums, but not very far above. It almost fails to provide a hero, since Steldan is very thinly characterized and several other characters are more picturesque and more active. A hero is vital for this sort of book; somebody has to physically carry the Equalizer — the device/concept that offers hope of individual success against the megalithic.

Three, I think this is because Swycaffer is still at that beginning stage in which most writers are making up their stories out of other stories. Having determined to write SF, they perform trial-and-error experiments until they arrive at something that sounds right to them. Most times, it sounds best to them where it most resembles features they admired in the stories they read as youngsters. I can't swear that this accounts for some of the weaknesses in Swycaffer's work, but if it were one of *my* early novels it certainly would.

If *Become the Hunted* were a color-by-number painting, some of the spaces would be meticulously filled out to the borders and some would contain only a few brush-strokes. They'd be the right color, but if you want detail on, for only one instance, the breakdown of the criminal organization, you are going to have to fill it in yourself. And if it seems to you that some of these progressions develop with suspicious ease, you may or may not be reassured by Swycaffer's reminding you that it wasn't a very smart or efficient criminal organization to begin with. Personally, I think he's doing what he can to cover for a characteristic weakness, which is that while he's good at getting people into trouble, he has to depend a little bit too much on coincidence and idiot behavior to get them out of it. Nothing fatal in any of this, but certainly something that ought to be worked on if Swycaffer expects more than minimal success. Or perhaps he ought to be thinking whether Swycaffer the writer might not have strengths different from those of the writers fondly remembered by Swycaffer the young reader.

David Drake is an old hand, author of a wide range of SF work including fantasy, science fiction, and even an SF-tinged thriller (*Skyripper*). Though there are writerly things he cannot or does not do, there are many he can do well. In addition, he does homework intelligently; his books are marked by factual research, and then by insight into what those facts add up to. In the case of *Birds of Prey*, which is set in late imperial Rome, you can smell the dust and feel the texture of the cloth; when you walk into an enclosed space, every

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aspect of its surfaces, lights and shadows is right there around you. As a matter of fact, it's beyond question that Drake at some point in his life made himself closely familiar with Mediterranean architecture of the period, including naval and religious architecture. Again and again, in public buildings, urban and rural private dwellings and aboard ships, you find yourself being able to in effect look around you. This is a quality not many writers — even our best — bring to our literature. Yet it greatly helps to define suppositional action, containing it within measurable spaces and thus enabling a better understanding of its intensity. Drake demonstrates how effectively it can create a sense of immediacy and of participation by the reader and I think it's high time somebody complimented him on it. I particularly admired one scene in which an apparently neutral exposition of architectural detail told me his apparently well-situated characters were getting into deep, deep trouble; that's pretty sophisticated work.

His story premise is a doozey, too: Aulus Perennius, imperial Roman secret agent, becomes involved with a time-traveler agent's benign attempt to change the past.

There are lovely resonances here. We are in the days of decayed Rome, when corruption, revolution and barbarian incursion vie with one another to sour the spirit of any decent man. Secret agent though he is, reporting to one of the last few governmental departments that is actually trying to do something on behalf of civilization, Perennius realizes he can actually do almost nothing. He lives beset by rages, offended by every sign of sloppiness and indifference, surrounded by such signs. Clearly, although this person is far away in one sense, he is perhaps quite close in another.

Similarly, the mysterious, tall, bald-headed Calvus, with his rescript authorizing him to draw on the Empire's resources for his confidential purposes, is a figure we might like to be; a para-time warrior with just a very few extraordinary talents, doomed to obliterate himself if he succeeds in altering the intolerable future but, withal, by that same token a figure of personal power no merely heralded figure in human history could match. Together, Aulus and Calvus, and a few companions Drake has given them almost excellently, set out to far-off Cilicia, where the gruesomely inhuman six Guardians have planted a nest of eggs from which, someday very far, yet psychically near, uncountable hordes of these insectile creatures shall erupt from the suddenly faithless soil and overcome the bright towers whence sprang Calvus.

Isn't that lovely? And it's not just any writer, either, who could write convincingly of a hard-bitten Roman's reaction to rayguns and to chitinoid exoskeletal tripeds, granted he comes

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from the culture in which what we now call "ten-dollar words" were a denarius a dozen. (The reaction, by the way, boils down to judging whether this is good or bad for Rome, meaning good or bad for the ideals that Aulus ascribes to the real Rome as distinguished from the Rome he sees all around him.)

This is a sophisticated book, in the sense that it's written by a sophisticated individual who, I would venture to say, never felt any great call to become a literatus but thinks the creation of these fictions is a pleasant and possibly even a meritorious thing. It is not, however, an especially good example of adventure writing, for approximately three reasons:*

One, the middle portion of the book does nothing to advance the plot. Some of the banging and wrenching here is quite good for its own sake, but it has nothing to do with Calvus's mission nor with Aulus's evolving view of the world. It may — may — reflect something of whatever is known of the youth of the emperor Diocletian. One episode appears to be a profferred justification for his subsequent persecution of Christianity. And so Drake may have felt required, not to say enabled, to create these interpolations. But what it looks like to the average eye is that book which is a 30,000-word novella whose ends are pressed apart by 50,000 words of jogging in a circle. We have seen a lot of those, particularly lately.

Two, there are a couple of places where characters who were developed for early reasons suddenly prove to be embarrassingly alive toward the end; with a start of realization, Drake kills them to get them offstage, his ruthlessness in that respect matching the excesses of Futurian* writers from forty years ago.

**I'll bet none of these writers expected a kind of Spanish Inquisition. Well, make that three out of four of these writers probably didn't expect it. And perhaps neither did the fourth.*

**Futurians were a group of Brooklyn street geniuses in the late 1940s, many of whom taught themselves to write, edit, criticize and publish SF. Some of them grew up to be James Blish, Damon Knight, Cyril Kornbluth, Robert A. W. Lowndes, Judith Merril, Frederik Pohl, Richard Wilson and Donald A. Wollheim, among others. I mention this because a long-time reader of this column has queried me about my occasional mysterious references to "Futurists." They did not restrict themselves to writing a particular kind of SF, though Pohl and Kornbluth in collaboration developed what Kingsley Amis later dubbed the "comic inferno" style. With almost no exceptions, however, none of them could approach the end of a book without having to kill off windrows of characters who ought never to have been named or fleshed out in the first place. Which means, actually, that they all sold their first drafts...and that their plots often depended on the popping-up of some character who would help the hero into the next scene and then be left there, leaning on his catapult, until Kornbluth came back and dropped a 16-ton weight on him.* Ecce Drako.

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Three, Drake has superimposed this adventure scenario on a poignant, subtle tale about Aulus; he has, in fact, clayed, fired, enamelled, glazed and re-fired that adventure scenario on what is happening to Aulus's psyche and on what is really happening vis-a-vis such characters as the young Sacrovir, who thinks Aulus killed his mother. It is nearly impossible to penetrate what Drake means by some of the things that happen in the last chapter, whereas they are important, highly effective things that carry this story far beyond what the usual critic thinks of "mere adventure" tales. I don't think this is subtlety; I think it's suppression. I think Drake was so convinced he ought to write an adventure story that he modelled *Birds of Prey* on mediocre adventure stories to the best of a noteworthy ability to overcome what he really wanted to write. I do not say there is an unheralded genius lurking in there, though there might be; I say there is someone who might benefit from once downplaying range, and stressing depth.

And, incidentally, though with some help from Drake I was able to follow and I think appreciate most of his little twists on names, I cannot imagine why this book is called *Birds of Prey* unless that is a very weak pun indeed, any more than I can imagine why Swycaffer named a book *Become the Hunted* and then aborted the only sequence in which someone attempts it.

Steve Perry's *The Man Who Never Missed* is noteworthy in part because it is a disguised but obvious attempt to start a series character on the model of *The Executioner, The Screamer, Sweater and Bludgeoner,* and other lucrative personalities who haunt the lightweight end of the book rack and turn up in just about everybody's barracks-bag.

If Emile Khadaji succeeds as this sort of character, that will be an interesting datum. One day, while killing wogs for the Empire like all other good soldiers, he suddenly had too much. Swept up in some sort of psychic efflorescence, he deserted, and shortly thereafter found a master in a quasi-oriental martial art who trained the callow youth into a well-centered man. Now a well-centered man of immense self-discipline and schooled reflexes, Khadaji takes on the Empire, a one-man wave of terrorism who never kills and rarely harms, but who convinces the Empire that an entire spontaneous native uprising has taken place on the oppressed planet Greaves.

In a way, this is Swycaffer's guy come 'round again, and in a way this is the same guy who used to play the Earthman to Eric Frank Russell's gullible alien invaders. But it will be interesting to see how many post-Vietnam barracks bags come to contain

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the chronicles of this particular hero. I hope somebody at some point asks how come if the Empire is so oppressive, Khadaji generates no actual spontaneous uprising. Here's this fellow ambushing and shooting down thousands of troopers (with six-month paralysis darts) and fomenting the impression of triumphant guerilla armies in the jungle, and yet not even one Greaver is moved to down tools and slope off into the thicket in search of some of this glory and freedom. This does not sound like a popular front to me.

And then I turned to Max Handley's *Meanwhile* and discovered that I ought to have looked a little closer at the cover blurb, which promised "A novel of unsurpassed adventure, excitement, and downright silliness." But by then I had read the first few paragraphs, and it was too late to back out.

Meanwhile — many of its chapters begin with that word — is in fact a novel of politics, so I didn't go as far astray as all that. But it's in the classic SF satirical genre, for all that many of its trappings are deliberately borrowed from the straight-faced sort of novel about the collisions between hitherto isolated postapocalyptic societies.

I will not belabor you with the plot. It revolves around the notion of an island ostensibly inhabited only by bronze-age women, who reproduce parthenogenetically in some way — Handley's details are sketchy here — and who periodically eat a male god. Said god is actually the latest in the series of exiles from the underwater civilization of technocratic males, who clone themselves and deny there is any other universe. Off over the horizon, unbeknownst to anyone, possibly including Handley until some late stage in the manuscript, is a heterosexual civilization of strict ecologists who don't even make fire, and who eventually come rowing up onto the scene.

To make all this work, Handley has to contradict himself here and there, and stretch coincidence often . . . too often, eventually. Finally, he makes the ultimate mistake of the over-reaching satirist; he begins to parody himself, as a reminder to us of how clever he has been. And then it's all over, as tactlessly blatant as Drake's last line in *Birds of Prey*.

But meanwhile, it has indeed lived up to its blurb. It may not be the book Handley tried to make it, but it's certainly full of memorable reading.

Who is Handley, you ask? Well, I've never heard of him before or since, and this edition is a reprint of a 1977 English hardback from a house I've never heard of. What with one thing and another, I suspect "Handley" of being someone else, but haven't a real clue.

This is, by the way, the first book I've reviewed from Popular Library's

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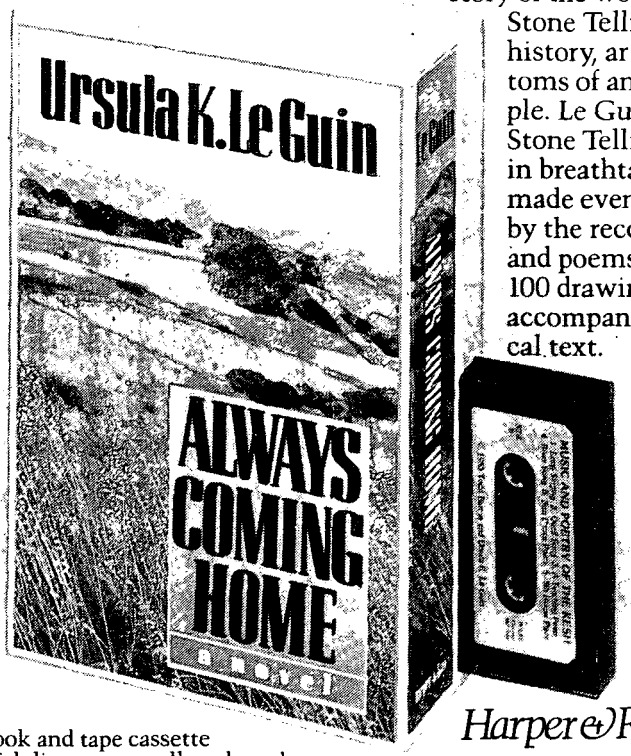

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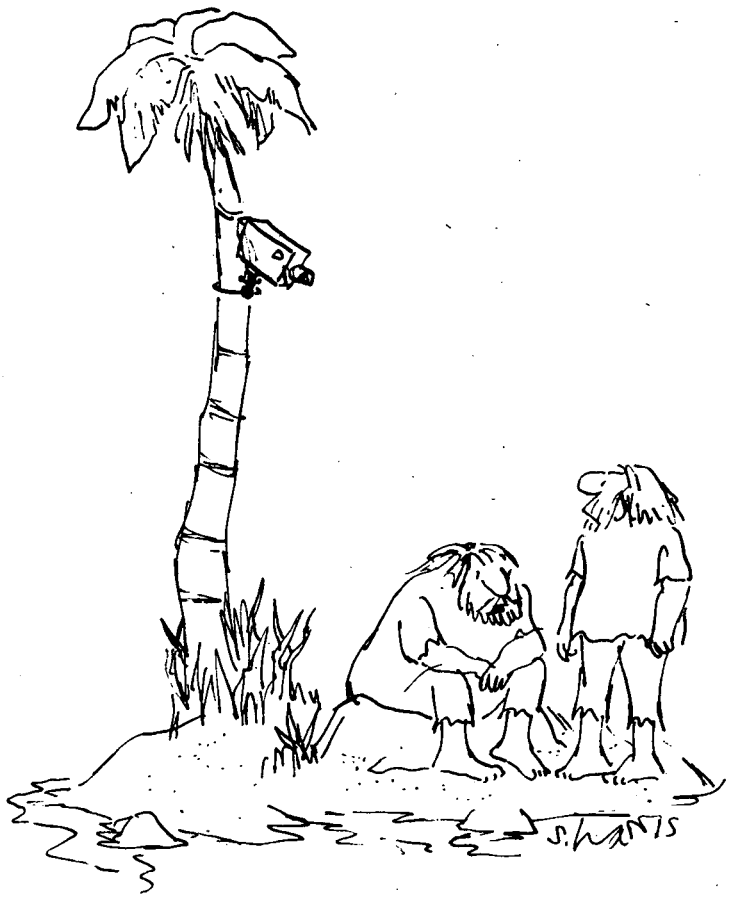
rather recent Questar imprint. There are too many colophons in this business now, each requiring splashy product, most of them a day late and a sesterce short. I think in general this trend is generating too many books that go for the obvious, present Questar item very much excepted. There's a limit to interesting reprints, and meanwhile the young Swycaffers and Perrys may be learning bad habits, while the Drakes may be avoiding good ones.

Would that I had the power to affect that situation.



"I don't mind the isolation, and I don't mind the hardship, but that confounded surveillance..."

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Richard Cowper's last story here was "A Message to the King of Brobdingnag," (May 1984). His latest is a short and surprising tale of this season.

A Matter of No Great Significance

BY
RICHARD COWPER

Where the stratosphere merged with the mesosphere and the earthward plunging particles flickered like brilliant fireflies and went out, an enormous vessel turned in slow splendor above the turning world below. Part artifact, part organism; if it resembled anything known to man it might perhaps have been a fragile long-limbed brittlestar, but one conjured out of blown glass and gold and silver filigree, then set to swim the unthinkably cold tides of starlight among the eternal silences of deepest space.

The vessel had a name, though it was not strictly translatable in human terms, being a concept compounded from the notions of search and pursuit and quest. The nearest human equivalent would probably be *God-seeker*. It also had a number — 2723. Its point of origin was the planetary system of a faint star that lay in a distant limb of our galaxy far, far too remote to be detected by the naked eye of even the most gifted Babylonian astronomer, and the optical telescope still awaited invention years and years ahead in the undreamed of future of humanity.

The mysterious visitor was about to depart from the Solar System. Freighted with treasure gleaned from the shadowy continents and the dark ocean depths, the little ferry capsules rose like silver bubbles through the Earth's atmosphere to be reunited with their host. By the time the parent ship had completed its penultimate global circuit, of the thirty little craft it had dispatched to our planet's surface, twenty-nine had homed in successfully and were now ranged along its feathery limbs like glittering dewdrops on a cobweb.

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The crews of the capsules assembled in the Great Hall and exchanged greetings. To a human eye unable to perceive their double hearts and their four vocal chords, the creatures who made up the gathering would have appeared to be both human and identical. To themselves, and to eyes that were sensitive to a range of electromagnetic radiation far wider than that to which the human retina is sensitive, they were all distinct one from another as any equivalent gathering of eighty-seven human beings would have been. With one proviso. Not one of them possessed a single visible physical characteristic that would have allowed them to be classed as either male or female.

When the twenty-ninth crew had checked in, the holographic image of a Mission Controller was projected upon a balcony above. Two thin golden bands encircled his left forearm. He held up his right hand, and the murmuring died into silence. "You have done well and have earned your rest," he informed his audience in a tongue that to a human ear would have sounded closer to music than to speech. "The primary collocation is extremely promising. Mentor Mikalis wishes me to convey to all of you his gratitude and his profound satisfaction."

He paused, and then continued in a slightly different tone: "As you are all aware, our aim is to proceed directly home via the prevalent spatial interstices whose disposition will remain favorable to us for the duration of precisely two further planetary rotations. It was our intention to transfer to our departure mode as soon as you were all safely aboard. Unfortunately, during the course of the twenty-third rotation, we lost contact with Melchior's vessel. Since then we have ascertained that Melchior and his companions are safe and are now making their way to their prearranged emergency recovery point. On our next circuit, Iphis Braktor will descend under cover of darkness and retrieve them. If, for whatever reason, they fail to make the rendezvous, he must perforce return without them, for we dare not run the risk of any further delay. However, we do not anticipate that this will be necessary. We will keep you informed of what transpires. Once more I thank you for what I am convinced will prove to have been a highly successful mission. May you rest well." He raised his hand once more in salute, turned, and was gone.

Toward evening on the second day of their journey, the wind shifted round to the northeast, blowing down the rocky valley from the snow-fingered mountain peaks that lay between the three travelers and the distant sea. Within an hour it had rolled the clouds away inland. Long, slender shafts of rose-pink light came lancing down across the southern hills, soft-

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ening their harsh outlines with smudges of delicate purple shadow. A wavering skein of wild geese flew honking high overhead, seeking the salt marshes far to the south.

The strangers rode in single file, following the narrow track that wound beside the chattering stream. By now they had grown accustomed to the awkward lurching gait of their steeds and had learned to trust them to pick their own surefooted way along the stony paths.

By and by they came to a place where the water tumbled over a shelf of rock into a shallow pool and a thick cluster of thorny bushes afforded some shelter from the sharp teeth of the wind. The leader reined up his mount, then leaned forward, struck it lightly on the side of its long, arching neck, and spoke a word of command. Obediently it shuffled forward, sank down onto its broad, knobby knees, and allowed him to step off. The other two men followed suit. Freed of their burdens, the animals lurched to their feet, then lolloped forward into the water, where they lowered their heads and began drinking noisily.

The western sky darkened precipitately to a deep magenta and became latticed with bars of gold. These faded even as they watched them, first to bright bronze and then to a smoldering coppery red. One of the men unfastened the thong of a tooled-leather satchel and took out a fistful of dried figs, which he offered to his companions. They stood side by side, contemplating the sunset and munching at the sweet, gritty fruit. The man with the satchel, whose name was Caspar, spoke for the first time in many hours. "How much farther is it, Mel?"

The leader glanced back at the mountains they had left, then he pushed back the loose sleeve of his thick woolen robe and consulted an instrument that was strapped to the inside of his wrist. "From here it cannot be more than four sterces," he said. "More likely three and a half."

"And whom are they sending for us? Did they say?"

"Iphis Braktor. He, too, speaks the tongue."

Caspar sucked the stickiness from his fingertips. "Iphis, eh? Well, I don't mind telling you I'll never have been gladder to see anyone."

"Me, too," said Bal Hazar. "Imagine spending the rest of your days down here."

"Remembering some of the places we've seen, we could have fared a great deal worse," said Melchior mildly. "This world has much to offer. It has great beauty. I feel Zurvan's presence here."

His companions eyed him with a mixture of respect, affection, and wry amusement. The one named Bal Hazar said: "And just where have you not felt Zurvan's presence, Mel?"

Melchior smiled. "It is true none-

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theless. To deny it would be to deny Zurvan himself. I sense a profound stillness here like that which lies at the center of a Nyffian vortex before the flow reverses. Mentor Mikalis must have felt it too."

"No doubt it was that which caused the earth to open and swallow up our capsule," suggested Caspar, and he helped himself to another fig.

Along the eastern horizon the mountains withdrew themselves into the violet shadows. Above them a solitary star emerged, swimming imperceptibly up toward the zenith. With one accord the men turned and watched it in silence, until finally Melchior said: "Four sterces, yet. Come. We must be on our way."

A full moon arose as they approached the valley's end; its pale light silvered the dark spears of the wind-tossed cypresses and scribbled faint shadows across the ragged tufts of wayside grass. Somewhere among the hills to the south, a wild dog began to howl, and then another answered it. The melancholy lament rose and fell upon the back of the gusting breeze. Caspar shivered, drew the hood of his cloak down around his ears, and urged his animal up alongside Melchior's. "Which way now?"

Melchior pointed to the northwest and drove his mount forward up the slope of the low hill.

On the summit, Melchior once more consulted the instrument on his wrist. "That's it over there," he said. "The hill on the other side of the village. We still have ample time."

The camels picked their way down the slope to the dusty white ribbon of the road and began plodding sedately toward the cluster of lime-washed houses. The harness jingled, faint and musical in the frosty air. The breeze blowing upon their backs carried their scent before them. A dog caught it and began to bark.

The houses were all settled down for the night, their wooden shutters closed fast against the prying wind. Here and there a fugitive streak of yellow lamplight gleamed through a chink. From one building, the last one of all, came the sound of voices raised in drunken song.

As they rode past, a man emerged from the shadows of the backyard and stepped out into the street. He peered up at Melchior, then ran forward, reached up, and caught hold of the hem of his woolen cloak. Melchior reined up his camel and gazed down at him in mild astonishment.

"Are you not the doctor? I sent for a doctor three hours ago."

"What is it," demanded Caspar. "What does he say?"

"He asks if I am a doctor," said Melchior, and turning back to the man, he asked: "What is it with you?"

"Not me, sir. It is my wife."

"She is ill?"

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"She is in labor. She needs help badly."

Melchior gazed blankly down at the upturned, bearded face, moon-pale and tense with desperate entreaty. Then he glanced up at the star-crowded sky above his head. The great ship was now plainly visible, a brilliant sparkling jewel hanging upon the rim of Zurvan's Wheel. But even as he wavered, he felt his camel rocking forward onto its knees.

"Come," he said to his companions. "Zurvan wills it. Bring what you have. There is still time."

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Mel? You known that Iphis won't wait!"

"He will wait," replied Melchior calmly. "Come."

They dismounted and followed the man across the moonlit yard, through an arched doorway, into a long, low shed. At the far end the small flame of an oil lamp flapped and flickered in the draft. In the stone stalls on either side, long-horned cattle lay quietly chewing their cud.

A girl was lying on a heap of hay beneath a wooden grille. Her dark eyes looked enormous in her ashen, sweat-silvered face. Between her naked thighs and still joined to her by its cord lay the child she had just given birth to.

Murmuring a prayer to Zurvan, Melchior stooped over her and gathered up the tiny, still body. Pressing its face to his lips, he sucked the clotted mucus from its mouth and nose and spat it out. Then he filled his lungs and blew hard into its mouth. Beneath his fingers he felt the pygmy ribcage swell, delicate as a bird's. He removed his lips, pressed inward gently with his strong, broad fingers, and heard the first small howl of outrage. He gazed down at the puckered little face in astonishment and turned to his companions. "What do I do now?"

"Cut through the cord," said Bal Hazar.

"What with?"

"Use your teeth. That is what these people do. I have seen it."

"You do it, then."

"We break the Law, Melchior. Do you accept the responsibility?"

"Have I not done so already? Do it."

Bal Hazar knelt upon the dry, sweet-smelling hay, lifted the living cord to his lips, and bit it through. "The salve, Caspar," he said. "You have it."

Caspar groped within his satchel and drew out a white tube. He twisted it between his fingers, pulled it apart, and handed it to Bal Hazar, who smeared both ends of the severed cord and then rubbed the protesting infant's body all over with the perfumed ointment.

The woman moaned faintly and reached out toward her wailing child. Melchior contrived to wrap it round in a corner of her own garment and then placed it between her hands. She drew it down and held it against

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her breast. It nuzzled in blindly against the nipple and fell silent.

A sudden brightness like a flash of summer lightning lit up the whole interior of the shed. "Iphis!" cried Caspar.

"Go," said Melchior. "Hold him. We will be with you directly."

Caspar hurried out into the empty, windy street. Above the hill behind the village, he could see the rescue capsule hovering in the moonlight like a glittering silver ball. He scrambled up onto the back of the nearest camel and urged the beast into a lolloping canter.

Melchior gazed down at the mother and child, wondering if he had done right or wrong. To interfere willfully with an alien life-pattern was to flout the Universal Law. Yet he had done it, and now it could not be undone. He turned to Bal Hazar, took the two half tubes of salve from him, twisted them together, and presented the salve to the husband. "Take it," he said. "It will heal your wife."

"What do I owe you, sir?"

"You owe me nothing," said Melchior. "It is a gift." From his finger he slid a slim band of some metal that resembled gold. He stretched it out between his hands until it had grown wide enough to slip over the baby's foot. It encircled the tiny ankle like a bracelet woven from an angel's hair.

"Thus do we claim you for Zurvan," he murmured.

The husband knelt down, bowed his head, and lifted the hem of Melchior's gown to his lips.

Awkwardly, Melchior leaned down and patted the man's shoulder, then he turned and nodded to Bal Hazar. "Let us be gone," he said.

They abandoned their camels at the bottom of the hill and began clambering up to the summit on foot. Halfway across the hillside, they saw three men hurrying down toward the village. One of the men shouted something to them as they ran past, but Melchior's twin hearts were pounding too loudly for him to make out the words. Five minutes later they had gained the crest of the hill to find Caspar and Iphis Braktor anxiously awaiting them. They climbed aboard the capsule and fled skyward.

Gazing down at the Judaean hills dwindling rapidly beneath them, they saw a flock of panic-stricken sheep cascading away down the slope toward Bethlehem. "Those herdsmen will have a curious tale to tell," observed Iphis Braktor wryly. "What delayed you, Melchior?"

"Nothing of any great significance," said Melchior.

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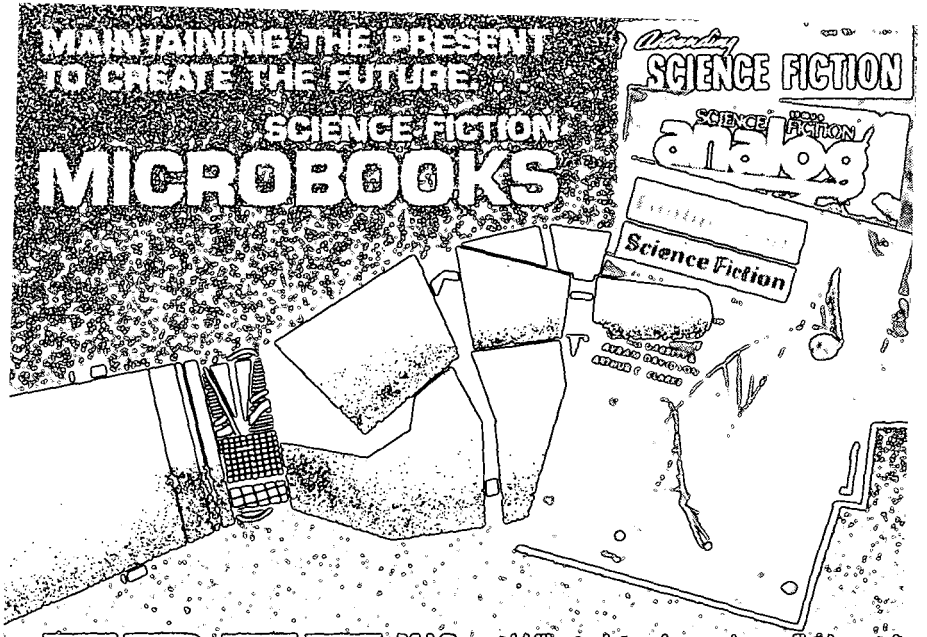

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There's much to be said for the power of positive thinking. It can, for some, conquer the "Fear of Flying" — even under the most trying circumstances.

Fear of Flying

BY
HAL HILL

The jumbo jet was cruising just a few feet below outer space at a speed that would whip your eyeballs out, when the tip of the right wing tore off. Many's the time I'd seen it on TV: dead, still faces peering through the thick-glassed portals at nightmares of engine failure and structural collapse. "Shee-it," I'd say. "They're in trouble. Pass the chips." Watching on TV is safer, of course, but you miss that sudden cold sweat, and the low-voltage paralysis that makes an idiot of you for those first few seconds.

The airliner pitched to the right before any of us that saw could speak. Slow-motion thunder rumbled through the aluminum shell of the plane. I heard the throttle increase as the captain righted her, then tilted slightly to the left. There was some vibration, but the craft seemed to be holding steady in a lopsided sort of way. Then the FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELT blinked on, and the juxtaposition of the flashing signs and a cabin littered with people tossed from their seats was ludicrous, and I remember laughing.

Most of my fellow passengers in second-class weren't laughing, however. Some were frozen in the prestages of panic, hyperventilating themselves into a swoon in preparation for the hard few minutes ahead.

Two elderly ladies in seats across the aisle held hands, then lay back in the bland blond recliners and closed their eyes. All around me the ranting and reasoning started up, a chattering din of importuning and admonitions that defined for me once and for all the word *babble*. In the seat behind me, a woman of weasel build and weasel disposition screamed in a cutting, Swedish-steel voice.

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Outside the portal the world wheeled by in clear blue, still miles above the milky film of clouds that marked the boundary between the plane and the lakes and rocks and hard-packed earth of terra firma. There was still the occasional bump or thump, but my traveling companions were beginning to redeposit themselves in their seats, checking for bruises and breaks — perhaps thinking of their lawyers in that precious time. Then came the voice from the speakers: "Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain speaking. Please remain seated and keep your seat belts fastened." His voice was an alpine lake, clear, calm, and totally out of place in the shambles of the cabin. Stewardesses were straightening their funny caps and were helping people back into their seats. A gentleman in tweed and a tidy fox-hunting mustache thought he'd broken his arm, but he wasn't sure. "We have sustained some minor structural damage, but the plane is responding well to the situation...."

"Part of the right wing has ripped off," the weasel woman shrieked.

The passengers on the left side of the aisle looked aghast at us on the right, as if we had crawled out on the wing and torn a portion off. Their wing was fine. What was wrong with ours?

"We will be landing at the first available runway," the captain finished. He had given it to us straight, because that's the way Americans want it. We want the truth, want a chance to fear the worst; then buck up and kick its ass.

Everyone was wearing their cocktails now, so the cabin reeked of liquor. I thought of those frail kindred souls that had earlier gathered in the bar to try and drink away their fear of flying. Strapped in their lounge chairs now, ordering more scotch, calling for gallons, hogsheads of drink to dispel the new fear of death, the dark, dry grandmama of fear of flying.

Sterile plastic nose masks suspended by clear poly tubes suddenly dangled from compartments above our heads, an army of formless fake spiders come to save us. A stewardess of apparent Nordic lineage began explaining how to use the breathing devices in case of emergency. The lines of her face were straight and clean, perfect for soap commercials and for telling ethnic types like myself to take a hike. She slipped the elastic around her head, the mask over her pert nose, and I watched the pristine fog form on the clear plastic as she talked. "This is only a precautionary device, of course, to be used in the unlikely event of cabin depressurization." She smiled blankly through the recitation, going on in a Girl Scout Cookie voice about the benefits of oxygen while her grim-faced audience shared black visions of wing collapse. Having blocked out the surrounding reality entirely, she

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was able to function; thus demonstrating succinctly the sometime advantage of living the unexamined life to the hilt.

I heard a loud crack like the report of a hunting rifle outside the portal. The plane pitched to the right, and I watched the stewardess fly into the open doorway of the food cupboard. Those occupying seats on the far side of the plane rose to a sharp angle, their arms flailing like rag dolls caught on a berserk carnival ride. It was then that I understood that I might soon die, and that is when I left.

I found myself looking down into the cabin from one of the dome lights mounted in the ceiling above the center aisle, a cool witness to the desperate jumble below. I squatted cross-legged in the light, and could feel the captain fighting to regain control of the machine. I watched my side of the teeter-tottering cabin rise, and myself with it, as the power to the engines on the ruptured wing was increased to compensate. My side of the cabin rose roughly fifteen degrees shy of level, and the plane steadied itself into a circular course, like a clipper ship caught in the upper reaches of a whirlpool. Not everyone was screaming, probably only 30 to 40 percent, but theirs were the ghastly serpentine moans of a dying jumbo jet.

When I was a five-year-old, I slipped into the icy water of a frozen lake and "drowned," as they say. I was "dead" for almost ten minutes, and it took me nearly five years to regain those early social skills such as feeding myself, talking, and pottying in the correct place. I was left with no memory of the experience, no prescient image, no mutant psychic or mental capabilities whatsoever. I can only suggest in retrospect that that episode was a sort of preparation for the plane ride. As we stare into the face of the worst possible danger, the primal instincts take over and we must choose fight or flight. But in certain situations — for example, plummeting jetliners, sharks, and nuclear war — those two options are withdrawn just when you need them most. The out-of-body experience was the only place to run, to hide and let a cooler, more ectoplasmatic head prevail. That analog "I" had no fear of death, recalling, perhaps, that I had died before.

The Viking stewardess was making her way down the aisle toward my section. She hobbled along at a tilt, groping from one armrest to the next. The tableau reminded me of the Mystery Spots my family had visited when I was a child. Each had a slanted room where water appeared to run uphill, cockily defying the frail laws of gravity. And now if the earth would only rush away from the plane as it approached....

The stewardess reached across the two empty seats next to me and

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pressed my arm. At her touch my Dr. Strange self winked out and I found myself looking across at a nasty bruise the attendant had sustained on her left cheek. Out the portal I could see that a section of the jet's aluminum skin had peeled off, exposing a top portion of the wing, and perhaps just a bit more of the wing had been nipped off with it. My newfound rapture remained unsullied by my return to the baleful predicament, however. I still felt here, there, and everywhere — the mark of the Mouse, as I recall.

"Mr. Karris?"

"Yes."

"Could you please come with me. The captain would like to speak with you."

I wore a giddy imitation of Buddha's smile as I moved through the lounge and first-class sections, an inscrutable near grin that easily told anyone who cared to look that I was vaguely insane. All the range of anguish showed on the faces I passed; and forlornness, and eyes lost in reflections of lost changes, loved ones, and lapsed insurance policies. I felt like Dante being led through another level of the Inferno; this one the Hell of falling from the sky.

I entered the spacious cockpit and watched the captain tag the copilot, leaving the junior officer to wrestle with the jet's jumbo spasms. "Mr. Eisenhower Karris?" He shook my hand. "I'm Ed Burke. Why don't we have a seat here," he said, indicating two molded plastic chairs and a small round cocktail table. Like myself, the captain was short. He had a bearish build, and thick Slavic features. The storm that raged in the hearts of his passengers lay becalmed in his placid gray eyes, and he wore my smile. He was simpatico, ready to live or die, live and die, or whatever. He winked at me as we sat, saying, "Your folks must've liked Ike, huh?"

"A golfer for his time," I quipped.

We laughed.

"The reason I've asked you up here, Ike — can I call you Ike? — is that we're having some trouble with the plane." He seemed almost to giggle at his understatement then, but checked himself. If his reaction seems strange now, it's because he was under an incredible amount of stress, as we all surely were. We weren't living men trying to thwart death, but dead men playing at a game of life. "I may have to call on your help if things get worse." He placed his elbows on the Formica tabletop, waiting for my answer.

The droll notion that anything could be done if conditions worsened was framed in a serious way, so I put on a serious face. "You can count on me, Ed," I heard myself saying. At the time it didn't cross my mind to ask him why in the world he would wish to count on me. I am a swarthy Mediterranean type, of uncertain ancestry, then nearing my thirty-fifth birthday. I was a stand-up comic still trying to

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struggle out of the lounges into the main act. I had an ex-wife who still enjoyed cussing me long-distance, a girlfriend hooked on awareness seminars, and a dwindling set of Melmac dishes with cigarette burns on them. I thought of the only airplane joke I knew. If things went from bad to worse, I could always advise my fellow passengers to bend over, put their heads between their legs, and kiss their sweet asses good-bye. Surely that wasn't what Ed Burke was after.

"That's great," Ed said, giving me a bearish cuff on the shoulder, "because I can't think of a better person than a man of the cloth to lead people through what I have in mind."

My stalwart vinyl face faltered then, its oaken lines scuttled in a wash of confusion. Then I remembered I had signed on as a minister — I *was* a minister. Having recently shelled out two dollars to become a minor prelate in the Universal Life Church, I was taking the plane to Flagstaff, Arizona, to perform a marriage ceremony for my kid sister. I had planned to write off the plane ticket as a business expense, hoping the IRS wouldn't have the manpower to send someone over to wring the truth from me when it came tax time. I revealed none of this to Ed, because it seemed unimportant. "Do you want me to pray, Ed?" I asked. I'd never prayed for myself, and had doubts I could do a decent job for others, but it was the perfect time to try.

"Oh, you can throw in some prayers," Ed said. "Praying is just another way of focusing, Ike. Every breath you take is a prayer; as a matter of fact, breathing is about the best prayer you got goin' for you. What I might need for you to do is to sell an idea for me. Ike, I might ask you to try and make the passengers believe in themselves. You'll have to sell them on life, leprechauns, and Tinker Bell dust. But first I'm going to have to sell you."

Ed Burke was not exactly Elmer Gantry, but he was close. He rolled and paused armadillo-like over the cocktail table as he recounted his life story to me. He had been a tail gunner in the Korean conflict, and after the war had gotten heavily involved in Amway. Free of that, he had concerned himself with what he called "free-lance speculation"; and one of the fruits of that speculation was the program he sold the airline, a program called "Focus." He also sold me. I took the canvas duffel bag he offered, returned to my seat, and waited.

As it stood, the plane couldn't be landed safely, but it could still be brought down in a sort of final slide-for-life if we could make it to a clear strip. If additional damage occurred, I was clear to initiate "Focus," and the plane was clear to crash and burn. I remained calmly displaced,

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one foot firmly planted on the vibrating cabin floor and the other stepping through life's golden door. Two young internists en route to a mountain climb were busy ministering to the passengers, handing out their best bluffs, dodges, and tranquilizers. "Stranger things have happened," I could hear them responding to questions regarding our collective future. "There's always a chance," they would say. Of course they were right. At least Ed Burke thought so, and I agreed. Until you are nothing more than a mottled smear across some charred section of real estate, there is always hope. What people facing death needed, Ed said, was focus. When people in similar situations did focus, they were almost always trying to see through to the other side. Like martyrs can focus, and adrenaline-fortified soldiers, and stiff-upper-lipped quartets playing Brahms on the decks of the *Titanic*. But that was not what Ed Burke was after.

The behemoth heavier-than-air ship gimped along for another thirty minutes before the engine toward the end of the right wing sputtered off and another segment of the wing tore away. The plane went into a moderate spin as it entered the middle reaches of the baleful whirlpool surrounding it. We wouldn't be landing that day. In two or three minutes, Ed Burke and his copilot would lose the last fall to the machine and we would all be pinned to the walls and floors and ceilings as the spinning accelerated into a dervish dance that would tear the plane apart before it hit the ground. Reanimated by their mutual fear, the rolling moans of the passengers filled the cabin.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Ed Burke's voice boomed from the speakers, "it's time to focus." Same inflection, same timbre as the voice that says, "Gentlemen, start your engines!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, this plane is going down fast," Captain Burke went on. That comment seemed to sever the vocal cords of the passengers, and only the sounds of the slashing winds were heard, that and the yodeling death throes of the overworked engines.

The stewardess, who had introduced herself as Marlene, turned in her seat at the front of the cabin and motioned me forward with a bullhorn I was to use. Marlene had been apprised of Project Focus. I clawed my way to the front, fighting the dizziness and nausea. Captain Ed was still talking. "We have no chance, my friends, and so you have nothing to lose. In approximately two minutes, you will have an opportunity to make history, and maybe, just maybe, save your lives. I would ask you now to give your attention to the guides stationed in both the first- and second-class sections. Those of you that choose to participate will follow their instructions."

Ed switched off then. No time for

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lengthy good-byes or worthless official apologies. He hadn't mentioned to me that I had a counterpart in first class. I wondered how he or she might be doing. I nodded to Marlene, and she began to unzip the duffel bag. There was not enough time — or space between ourselves and the ground — for preamble. The matching sets of wings in the bag were fashioned from thick Styrofoam. They were barely wider than the arms they would cover so that the wind would not rip them from their Velcro fastenings. They reminded me of skinny versions of what a child might wear in a Christmas pageant. Along the tops the avian details had been feathered in with acrylics.

There was laughter as Marlene pulled the wings from the bag, genuine cartoon ha-ha-ing resonant with rapture, with paradox; a good sign. I switched on the bullhorn. "If you've ever wanted to try and fly, now is the time. Remember now your childhood dreams, dreams of skimming the clouds, then landing on the rooftops and playgrounds of your hometown." I felt I was no longer a man of flesh and blood, no corporeal plug of mass and volume, but an ephemeral creature of myth and madness, a chimera. And make no mistake, I was raving mad: I thought I could fly.

A potbelly with zombie eyes had left his seat and was lurching malevolently toward me. He had taken my suggestion to be the final insult, and was intent on killing me before he died. One of those types who doesn't cotton to newfangled ideas. But I was a Titan then, archetypical oarsman of the brainwarp, and I simply grabbed his bulky frame with one hand as he moved toward me in slow motion, and threw him across the cockpit.

I looked around the cabin, surveying the faces of the dead. Most of them shone with the proud courage it takes to accept the worst, but here and there was the humbler aspect of one who still dared hope for the best. Those were the flyers, those urine-soaked fantasists who were making their way down the aisle and strapping on their wings. "I can fly!" they would shout as they left their seats, and soon all of us that would fly were chanting, "We can fly!"; drowning out the lugubrious echoes of the faltering engines.

Marlene fitted me with wings, and I could feel their quilled ends commingling with the long, hollow bones and spare flesh of my arms. I looked at Marlene, and she was a Valkyrie with eyes deep and etched as Icelandic fjords. "I can fly, I can fly," she sang as she moved her arms up and down. I fell in love with her then. I popped open the emergency exit as easily as flipping the top off a beer can, and six of us tumbled out together.

We landed less than a mile from the highway in open Arizona desert.

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From a distance we watched the jet plummet like a ten-cent balsa glider without a tail wing, hunks of it tearing off as it approached the ground. Then it exploded in a torrid theater of red and black jet fuel. According to the newspapers, there were no survivors.

The six of us told our story. One of the young doctors and I had broken our legs in the landing. Not bad considering we tumbled roughly ten thousand feet. We showed them our broken legs in the hospital, but the authorities and media only shook their heads at our wounds, and clucked their tongues, saying it was unconscionable that we would go to such lengths to support such a cruel and tasteless hoax.

How we got on the passenger list, they didn't know. Why a seasoned attendant such as Marlene would go along with the scam, they were at a loss to understand. The airline staunchly denied the existence of any lunatic program called "Focus," and indeed, in retrospect I suspect it might have been the brainchild of one man, Ed Burke. Ed stayed with his plane that day, perhaps feeling he could fly the craft without wings if he could focus. And if that's the case, then I am somewhat surprised he didn't make it. No one in first class appeared to attempt to fly. Who knows.

We stuck to our story for a long time. The weasel woman, whose name was Edna, shrieked until she lost her voice. And the fox-hunting gentleman, whose name was Edgar Stone, explained over and over in a dignified, paternal voice that we had done what we claimed; that his arm was indeed broken at the time, but that flying could still obviously be accomplished with a broken arm. The two internists gave up mountain climbing, saying it no longer offered a challenge to them. We showed them our wings and flapped them and flapped them until they were confiscated by the court and we were all sent to psychiatric hospitals.

After our releases, Marlene and I were married. We spent several years together trying to fly. We remade the wings and spent weekends running off high dives and lake cliffs, but we never flew again. And that is understandable, since we are no longer within spitting distance of death. We could, of course, go up in a plane and jump out, but that would be cheating, and I have a feeling it wouldn't work. You see, dying in an airplane crash is a tragic but accepted way to go; whereas jumping from a jet with foam wingettes would seem to be a decidedly unnatural means of exiting this life. But if you're ever up near the lower levels of outer space in a jumbo jet, and the wings start to fall off, you might try flying.

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Stan Dryer ("A Day in the Life of a Classics Professor," December 1984) returns to F & SF *with another delightfully witty story, this one a tale of visitors from outer space who descend upon some very proper members of the upper-crust of our society.*

Our Extraterrestrial Visitors

Some Notes for the Pride Family Archives

BY
STAN DRYER

For the past few weeks, Stacey has been urging me to put down on paper some description of our recent visitors from outer space. However, it was not until this morning that I was subjected to the full onslaught of my wife's persuasiveness. She waited until my manservant Grant had served the eggs Benedict and filled our coffee cups with the particularly savory brew that Mansards of London blends for us.

"Francis," she said, "how are you coming with your description of our visit from the Casparians?"

"Haven't quite started, my dear," I said. "Been awfully busy, you know." I tried ducking behind the morning *Times,* but she reached over and pulled down the paper.

"Francis Warrington Pride," she said, "exactly what is keeping you so busy?"

"Well," I said, "today I was planning to walk the fences with the gamekeeper."

A look of triumph came into Stacey's blue eyes. "Take a peek outside," she said.

I looked. A steady rain sheeted across the meadows, and a row of ugly black clouds marched along the distant horizon of Buzzards Bay. It was not a day for walking fences.

Stacey smiled. "While the Casparians won't be back in our lifetime," she said, "I think you should get the particulars of their visit down on paper. Warren's descendents should know just what to expect." Warren, I should note, is our son, Francis Warrington Pride III, currently a junior up at Harvard.

"Well, I'll think on that," I said.

Stacey's smile hardened into a thin line that brooked no procrastination.

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"You can have the library all to yourself," she said.

So I have settled down at the big oak table beneath the portraits of Ebenezer and Amalgam Pride to see if I can put together some rational narrative of the Casparians' visit.

The responsibility for the arrival of our strange visitors must rest with Dr. Pristholm, who, while not in the Pride patrilineal line, is still a blood relation. Perhaps a small digression into the history of our family will clarify his relationship.

Most of Weetauket Island has been in the hands of the Pride family for the past 250 years. It was originally acquired by a Captain Ebenezer Pride, who arrived on the good ship *Fortune,* a sort of second section of the *Mayflower.* (There are some who say that the *Mayflower* was sent on ahead with the servants while the personages of social standing followed on the *Fortune.)*

In any case, after a short stay in Plymouth, Captain Pride became disenchanted with the management of the new colony. Sailing south from "the baye knowne as Woods Holl," he found an island "faire in every aspecte and knowne to the sauvages as Weetauket." Purchasing it from the local tribe for a few glass beads, he cleared what is now Lands End Farms, built a home suitable for a patrician, and commenced the trading enterprises that became the foundation of the Pride fortune. The house he built, since considerably modernized, is our present residence.

There were divisions of the land in later years. Captain Pride's great-grandson, Joshua Pride, fell in with bad companions in the port of New Bedford and was forced to sell the land at the northern tip of the island. The land became the village of Weetauket, in its time one of the most unlicensed whaling ports on the New England coast.

In the 1920s, Melody Pride, the daughter of Amalgam Pride, the steamship baron, ran off and married a young Swedish immigrant, Eric Pristholm. Eric purported to be a man of inventive genius, but none of his ideas ever solidified into anything marketable. However, Melody was her father's darling, and to keep her close to him, Amalgam ceded the southern end of the island to Pristholm on the condition that he reside there. Amalgam paid for the construction of Pristholm Hall, a turreted Victorian eyesore that is still a landmark for miles at sea. It was there that Eric went through several millions of Amalgam's money. Hundreds of vacuum tubes flashed into oblivion in his laboratory, autogyros thrashed off Lands End Bluff to crash into the breakers below, and a variety of vehicles powered by perpetual-motion mechanisms ground to a standstill on the island lanes.

Eric and Melody produced one offspring, Stedman, who carried the

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inventive genes of his father. When his parents died in the fiery disintegration of a new hydrofoil craft they were demonstrating to the navy, Stedman picked up the challenge and went on. He wandered his way through MIT and, upon obtaining his doctorate in electrical engineering, took up residence in Pristholm Hall. His parents had wisely placed his inheritance in a trust fund, the income from which kept him in bed, board, and electronic parts for his experiments.

Stacey and I have always had the objective of bringing the southern tip of the island back into ownership under the Pride name. Thus, once or twice a year, we invited Dr. Pristholm over for dinner to broach the subject of the sale of his property. It was in response to such an invitation that Dr. Pristholm arrived at our home on an evening a little less than a year ago. While his hair was a bit on the shaggy side and his dinner jacket worn, he had obviously made an effort to make himself presentable.

Pristholm was a bit awkward in social situations, but my lovely wife soon put him at ease. "Oh, Stedman," she said, "I'm having such troubles getting a clear picture of the symphony broadcasts on the TV."

Stedman at once launched into a discussion that doomed the dinner hour conversation to parabolic antennas and high-frequency filters.

We had just had bottled a cask of a rather fine Delamain cognac put down by Amalgam Pride in the early thirties. In the library after dinner, I asked Grant to bring us up a bottle. At the first sip Pristholm's face broke into a smile of genuine pleasure.

"What say you, Stedman," I said, "have you thought about our offer on your property?" We had not been so crass as to suggest to Pristholm his eviction. We had, however, made what we felt was a most reasonable offer that would permit the property to pass back to the Pride primogeniture on his demise.

"Can't be bothered with that now," said the scientist. "I'm too busy with my new discovery."

"Ah, discovery," I said. "How are things going in the science game?" It paid to keep tabs on Pristholm in case he was about to embark on an experiment that would reduce our entire island to smoldering rubble.

"Well," said the scientist in a voice that hardly concealed his pleasure with himself, "I am in receipt of a message from the Casparians."

I glanced at Stacey, thinking he was referring to some long-lost member of the Pride family, but her blank expression showed she was as puzzled as myself.

"The Casparians?" I said.

"Yes," Our resident scientist leaned comfortably back in his chair. "I have the good fortune to be in contact with beings from the depths of space."

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"Goodness," said Stacey, "you mean Martians, little green men, that sort of thing?"

"I mean," said Pristholm, "beings from far beyond our solar system. My calculations indicate they are located a few thousand astronomical units away in the area of the Casparian nebula. Hence my name for them, the Casparians."

"Now just a minute," I said, summoning up some rusty facts from my freshman astronomy course at Harvard. "An astronomical unit is, if I remember correctly, the distance from Earth to the Sun. And the nearest nebula is a good deal more than a thousand astronomical units from here."

"Of course, of course," said Pristholm. "I suspect they are cruising around in their ship having arrived in our backyard from their nebula using their faster-than-light drive. They have no doubt been listening to us for some time."

"You mean some sort of cosmic wiretap?" said Stacey.

"They cannot have avoided receiving the endless television and radio signals that radiate from our planet," replied Pristholm. "We are probably known as the 'garbage star' to our neighbors in space."

"They may be listening to us," I said, "but how do you know they are out there?"

Dr. Pristholm took a slow and deliberate sip of his brandy. "They have transmitted a picture," he said.

"A picture?" I said.

"For the past three years," said the scientist, "I have had my radio receivers scanning the area of the Casparian nebula. It is not a sector of interest to other radio astronomers, so I have had it as a kind of private hunting preserve.

"About a year ago I recorded a signal of a periodic nature. Examination of its waveforms showed it was remarkably similar to the signals we use for television transmission. It was a matter of no great difficulty to modify a television set to display the information in the signal."

"Goodness," said Stacey, "what did you see? Some alien soap opera?"

"Certainly not," said Pristholm. "The distances over which these signals are being transmitted permit only fixed images to be received. There were a number of sequences of patterns indicating that the beings making the transmissions are oxygen breathing, and giving the general location of their planet of origin. There was also a picture of the aliens themselves."

"Remarkable," I said. "And just what do they look like?"

Pristholm took a final sip of his brandy and put down the glass. "I would not attempt to describe them to you. However, you should feel free to come and see for yourself."

Although Pristholm had tickled my curiosity, I was a bit dubious

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about the whole Casparian business. So the next morning at brunch, I thought I would check things out with my manservant, who is generally the best source of information on such matters.

"Grant," I said as he was pouring coffee, "Dr. Pristholm thinks he has contact with beings from outer space."

The coffeepot did not waver. "So I understand, sir," said Grant.

"You know about it?" I said.

"Certainly, sir. Young Eileen Watkins, Dr. Pristholm's housekeeper, is a frequent visitor in our servant's quarters. She has related some of the things Dr. Pristholm has said. From this information I deduced that he had received communications from some extraterrestrial beings."

"You mean he has discussed this matter with a servant?" I said.

"Not discussed," said Grant. "It appears that he talks in his sleep."

"In his sleep?" I said. "Just what are you implying?"

"Apparently Miss Watkins's duties go somewhat beyond the usual job description of a housekeeper," said Grant.

"Goodness," said Stacey, "all of this interbreeding with the village can come to no good."

"Enough of that," I said, "Grant, what are the chances that Pristholm really has contact with some aliens?"

Grant did not answer until he had set down the coffeepot on the sideboard. Then he turned and delivered the following lecture.

"According to Professor Carl Sagan, the probability of our encountering other intelligent life in our galaxy depends upon a number of factors. These include the rate at which stars are created in our galaxy, the probability of a star having a planet capable of sustaining life, the probability of intelligent life forming on such a planet, and the average lifetime of an advanced civilization. Professor Sagan postulates a million civilizations capable of transmitting radio signals being present in our galaxy. A reasonable number of these would be close enough to permit communication with us.

"On the other hand, Dr. Michael Hart questions the calculations of other astronomers as to the probability of formation of habitable planets. As the result of his computer simulations, he claims we may be the only advanced civilization in the Galaxy."

"That certainly seems to sum up the matter," I said. "You are to be commended for your knowledge of the subject."

"Thank you, sir," said Grant. "I try to keep current on scientific opinion. Will there be anything else?"

"One of these days," said Stacey when Grant had left, "we are going to be found stone-cold, bored to death by your wordy manservant."

Stacey may have found Grant's little dissertation dull, but it was suffi-

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cient evidence for me. Stacey had an appointment that morning with the Boston Antiquarian Society, so after I had seen her on board the Beechcraft at our airstrip, I drove on down to the southern tip of the island.

The general state of neglect of the grounds around Pristholm Hall made me only the more anxious to see the place back in the hands of the Pride family. The hall itself, half masked in a tangle of weeds and brush, was sadly in need of repairs. The only sign of new construction was a strange collection of large dishes and rods that had sprouted from the hall's roof. These, I surmised, were our scientist's radio antennas.

A young lady answered the door. I knew she must be the Eileen whom Grant had mentioned. She was a tall and comely lass with a pleasant visage and a figure that made one wish to rethink the whole business of mixing with the village stock.

"Dr. Pristholm is in his laboratory downstairs," she said with a disarming smile.

I followed her through a series of dusty rooms stacked high with models of abandoned inventions, a vast monument to inutility. We descended a flight of stairs, went through a metal door, and entered a room crammed with metal cabinets full of electronic equipment. Lights flashed, wavy lines jumped across tiny screens, and speakers emitted little beeps and whistles. It was obvious where Pristholm had been putting the income from his trust fund, money he should have been spending on a reasonable staff of grounds keepers.

"Well, Stedman" I said as Dr. Pristholm stepped forward to greet me, "it appears that you have been busy. I am interested in seeing what you claim to be these creatures from outer space."

"Certainly, certainly," said Pristholm with his best mad-scientist grin. He led me over to what looked like an ordinary television set mounted in one of the racks. "There is a series of thirty-two pictures," he said. "The first thirty-one give the fundamental facts about the Casparians' home planet and culture. I shall not attempt to explain the incredibly clever way this was accomplished. However, you may be interested in the thirty-second picture."

Pristholm pressed buttons, flicked switches, and twisted knobs until a picture flickered into focus on the tube. While it was a bit fuzzy, it showed what was unmistakably a group of four creatures. Their heads were covered with a stubble of hairs from which peered a multitude of tiny eyes above a little slit of a mouth. Their bodies were squat and round, and they stood upright on what appeared to be six tentacles. Each of the creatures was standing with two of these appendages raised before him with the claws spread open.

"These are the creatures I call the

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Casparians," said Stedman. "I estimate their height at roughly six feet. I think the raised tentacles are meant to indicate the open hand, the universal sign of friendship."

"They might just be indicating they are ready to claw us apart," I said.

"That is not borne out in the rest of the message they have sent," replied Pristholm. "They profess only a willingness to share and exchange information."

"Well," I said, "you have convinced me these creatures actually exist. What do you plan to do next?"

"I am planning to take my findings to the government in the hopes they will assist me in inviting these beings to visit us."

I knew just how fortunate it was that I had come down to see Pristholm. Naive scientist that he was, he did not realize that the only assistance the government ever gives a private citizen is in the transfer of his rightful property into its tax coffers. The last time the government had come to Weetauket Island had been during the Second World War when they had expropriated a large portion of Lands End Farms for a Coast Guard training base. While they had built the airstrip that makes commuting to Boston so convenient, they had destroyed one of the better grouse meadows in the process. I could just imagine what they would do if they got onto Pristholm's discovery. Half the island would be turned into a secret installation surrounded by barbed wire and soldiers who would spend their leave time seducing our scullery maids.

"Now Stedman," I said, "just why do you feel you need the help of the government? You seem to have done remarkably well so far without their assistance."

The scientist shook his head sadly. "The transmitter," he said. "I do not have the financial resources to build a powerful enough transmitter."

"Just what sort of funds do you require?" I said. I could not believe how all of this was playing into my hands.

"For a couple of hundred thousand, I could pick up a two-megawatt job secondhand that would do the job nicely," he said.

Now two hundred thousand was almost double what I had offered Pristholm previously, but I felt the circumstances warranted an increase. "Stedman, old chap," I said, "I am so interested in this project that I may be willing to finance it. However, I need a few more details. If you do get your transmitter, what do you plan to do with it?"

"I would invite the Casparians here for a visit. From my interpretation of their messages, they do not intrude upon a lesser culture unless specifically invited. However, they profess a desire to share their knowledge with us in exchange for the chance to observe our culture."

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"Observe our culture?" I said.

"I suspect that they see it as an opportunity to collect artifacts from a primitive society," said the scientist.

"They will be sorely disappointed if they expect to find anything primitive at Lands End Farms," I said. "However, as it is in the cause of science, I am willing to increase my offer for the rights to your property to two hundred thousand."

Pristholm's face brightened at my words. "You are most generous," he said.

"Think nothing of it," I said. "I shall have my attorneys draw up the necessary papers immediately."

About a month later I received a call from Pristholm. "Francis," he said, his voice full of excitement, "I am ready to transmit my message to the Casparians. I thought that you and Stacey might want to come by for this historic moment."

"Certainly," I said, "we'll hop right down there."

As Stacey said afterward, it was a good thing we took the opportunity to check on Pristholm. When young Eileen escorted us into the laboratory, the scientist handed us a line drawing. "This is the image I propose to send," he said.

The drawing depicted two nude human figures, male and female, with hands extended to grasp the tentacle of a Casparian.

"What kind of prurience is this?" demanded Stacey.

Pristholm looked genuinely puzzled. "Prurience?" he said.

"You know exactly what I mean," Stacey said. "Transmission of this type of material by television is not condoned by our society. I would assume it would be even more abhorrent to a race you claim is more civilized than our own."

"But," said the scientist, "it is important for them to see us as we are. There is no doubt they will recognize the reproductive organs...."

"Enough of this salaciousness," Stacey said. "Proper dress is an essential part of our culture. While it is not necessary that this couple be dressed in formal wear, I would suggest, at the bare minimum, attire suitable for attending the Boston Symphony. Don't you agree, Francis?"

I could only second her request.

Thus, we avoided a social faux pas of galactic proportions. The picture was redrawn with the human couple fully clothed. On the next night, when the Casparian nebula was at its zenith, Pristholm steered his big dish antenna onto target and transmitted a repetitive image of the drawing for a good hour. This process was repeated for a week. Then the transmitter was set to send a beacon signal every few minutes so our new friends would be able to locate Weetauket Island on their approach to Earth.

It was not simply a matter of waiting for the arrival of the Casparians. Pristholm estimated their trip would

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take somewhere between six and nine months, as they could not use their faster-than-light drive so close to an inhabited solar system.

Time passed, and I all but forgot the whole business. Then, on an evening in May some four months later, Stacey and I were having a quiet moment in the library. I was working on my collection of Revolutionary War currency, and Stacey was filling in a few blanks in the Pride genealogical charts. We were interrupted in these pleasant pursuits by Grant's entrance.

"I do not wish to intrude," said my manservant, "but a large craft has landed in the polo field. I have strong reason to believe it is of extraterrestrial origin."

"Oh, damn," I said, "it must be the Casparians arriving early. Ring up Dr. Pristholm and have him take care of them."

"I am sorry sir, but if you will remember, Dr. Pristholm is at the Wise Men of the World Conference."

"Double damn," I said. Grant was correct. Once a year Pristholm went off with a hundred other selected scientists to some secret rendezvous where they spent a week mulling over the terrible state of the world. At the end of the week, the scientists issue a statement describing five new ways our civilization is about to go down the tubes. Then they go back to inventing better nuclear warheads or whatever else they do.

"Grant," I said, "we are going to have to deal with these beings on our own. Stacey, you want to come along?"

"I think not," Stacey said. "I'm just getting Joshua's illegitimate offspring straightened out."

As Grant and I approached the polo field, I became aware of a pink glow visible through the trees ahead. I felt little fear, mostly, I suppose, due to Grant's comforting presence. He is an ex-marine who stands well over six feet in height.

When we came into the open, we discovered before us a large luminescent dome that occupied at least half the width of the field.

"This is deuced inconvenient," I said to Grant. "You think we could ask them to move? Chub Hamilton is flying the whole Myopia team down in two weeks, and we are not going to be able to play polo with that object sitting there."

"I am not sure where else on the island other than on the airstrip they could place so large a craft," said Grant. "And on the airstrip it would most certainly block the runway."

"As usual you are right," I said. "We'll just have to hope they'll be gone in a week."

"I would not put too many hopes on that, sir," said Grant. "One generally does not travel from a distant star for a stopover of only a few days."

As we walked toward the strange dome, its glow began to pulsate.

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A crack appeared in the surface near the bottom and spread outward to reveal a ramp that folded to the ground. Down this ramp came two creatures of a pasty green shade whom I recognized as Casparians. If anything, they were uglier than in Pristholm's picture.

They came forward with raised tentacles. I stepped forward and raised my open hand in reply. "Welcome," I said. "Welcome to Weetauket Island and the United States of America." While it is not any business of the government's whom I invite to Lands End Farms, I felt it my duty as a citizen to at least inform these beings as to the country in which they had landed.

The creatures totally ignored me. The taller of the two Casparians bounced past me on its rear tentacles and made straight for Grant. Extracting a small box from a pouch on its side, the creature presented the box to my manservant. With gestures of its tentacles, the Casparian indicated that Grant was to hang the object around his neck.

Grant complied. I was momentarily alarmed that this device might cause him to disintegrate or to be transported to some distant planet, but Grant remained there solidly in the flesh.

The creature now uttered a series of strange sounds halfway between squeaks and barks and amazingly, Grant replied with the same noises. This exchange went back and forth for a couple of minutes until my patience wore thin.

"Grant," I said, "please inform me what is going on."

"As best I can gather, sir, the device hanging around my neck is attuned to my mind. It permits me to understand their language and to speak a reasonable facsimile of their tongue. They addressed me as leader, and I delivered a short speech of welcome to this planet."

I could see where this misconception might have arisen, as Grant was dressed in his usual conservative black suit, and I was still wearing a somewhat flamboyant lounging jacket that Stacey had given me the previous Christmas.

"Please inform them," I said, "as to the fact that I should be considered the leader. I also think it would be more appropriate if I were to wear that device, thus permitting me to converse with them directly."

"I have already attempted to explain to them our social relationship," said Grant.

"And?" I said.

"Apparently in their culture, position in the social hierarchy is determined solely by the physical height of an individual. As I am the taller of the two of us, they have assumed I am the leader. I think it would be a mistake to attempt to rectify that misunderstanding at this juncture."

"Such a system is beyond my com-

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prehension," I said. "If we adopted it, our nation would be governed entirely by basketball players."

"It does appear to work successfully for the Casparians," said Grant.

"Very well," I said. "I guess we shall have to continue to live with this misunderstanding. Please let them know that the full facilities of Lands End Farms are at their disposal."

Actually I was not totally displeased with the failure of our alien friends to see the true nature of our social order. If they decided to perpetrate some mischief such as the kidnapping of a leader, they would spirit away Grant rather than myself.

My manservant now made more squeaky barks, and the aliens replied. Then Grant turned to me again. "They have expressed their thanks for your hospitality and shall use our island as a base for their exploration of this planet. In exchange, they will be happy to impart to us whatever knowledge we request concerning their culture and science. Now they require rest to acclimate themselves to our planetary cycle of light and darkness."

"Sort of interstellar jet lag, I take it," I said. "Tell them I understand completely. It took me a week to recover when Stacey and I flew to Monte Carlo for that weekend last winter."

The next morning at eleven, when I was sure our visitors would be up and about, I took Stacey down for a visit. Grant of course came along as interpreter.

As we started out from the house, a thought struck me. "Grant," I said, "the presence of these beings will not go unnoticed by the servants. If word of them were to leak out, the island would soon be swarming with the so-called gentlemen of the press."

"I have taken the liberty of telling the staff that the Farms have been chosen as the location for the filming of a science fiction motion picture," said Grant. "I have also informed them that if this fact is kept secret, they will have more opportunities of meeting some of the personalities appearing in the film."

"Good thinking, Grant," I said.

As we approached the polo field, the sound of a strange and unearthly music came to our ears. "That music," I said to Stacey, "must emanate from the craft of our visitors. Such strident atonality could not have been produced on our planet."

"If you will excuse me, sir," said Grant, "I think you will find that music to be of earthly origin. I recognize it as one of the pieces played by the Electric Armpit."

"The Electric Armpit?" I said.

"Yes," said Grant. "It is a group that plays a genre of music known as puke rock. No doubt our alien visitors have recorded broadcasts of this music for their own use."

"You amaze me with your knowledge," I said.

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"It is unfortunately knowledge that has been forced upon me," replied Grant. "Eileen Watkins, Dr. Pristholm's housekeeper, is enamored of the group. She often plays recordings of their performances for the servants, accompanying this music with her own vocalizations."

"It must be pleasant for the servants," I said.

Grant frowned. "If I may express an opinion, sir, I consider this music to be morally decadent in the extreme. Our younger chambermaids are at an extremely impressionable age. To see them embracing this raucous noise as representative of what is generally acknowledged to be the highest of the arts is most discouraging..."

"Enough, Grant, enough," said Stacey.

We now entered the polo field and found a scene of much activity. Our alien visitors had brought out of the spacecraft a number of machines that looked like giant wheels lying on their sides. Inside the circle of each machine were seats for two of the creatures, the rest of the frame being crowded with strange machinery. Several of the Casparians were poking about the devices, pausing occasionally to snap their tentacles to the beat of the Electric Armpit.

"What seems to be going on here?" I asked Grant.

"I gather from their conversation that these are machines designed for local transport. They are preparing for expeditions about our planet."

"Perhaps you might warn them about flying around during daylight hours," I said. "Much of the population is considerably less cosmopolitan than Stacey and myself and might become panicked at the sight of these craft and their crews."

One of the taller Casparians now approached us and spoke in his strange tongue with Grant. At the conclusion of this conversation, my manservant turned to us. "There is no danger of these craft being observed," he said. When in use, they are surrounded by some type of force field that prevents their observation. Apparently a number of these craft are already out scouring our planet for memorabilia. When objects of interest are found, exact reproductions are transmitted back here to the receptor." Grant pointed to a little transparent dome that had been set up on the field. Inside, a number of Casparians worked around what appeared to be a large metal box.

"We have been invited to observe its operation, if you like," Grant said.

We approached the receptor accompanied by our Casparian guide. Grant translated as he spoke. "A device carried by each explorer team picks up the molecular vibrations of any object placed in its field and transmits those back to the receptor, which produces an exact re-creation of the object."

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"Very clever," I said. "Sort of a three-dimensional xerographic copier."

As we watched, the box vibrated and beeped. One of the aliens opened a door at one end and extracted a flat rectangular object.

"I say," said Stacey, "isn't that a Norman Rockwell painting?"

It was indeed an oil painting of a wide-eyed little boy in a dentist's office, obviously one of Rockwell's more saccharine efforts. It was followed by a Kewpie doll and a plastic flamingo of the type that adorn the lawns of our lower-class neighborhoods. Bad taste is apparently not limited to our solar system.

We were then invited for a tour of the interior of the spacecraft. Like a lot of guided tours, this one fell somewhere between dull and boring. A maze of corridors, bunk rooms full of giant fish tanks in which the Casparians apparently slept, dining areas where food with the most appalling stench was being prepared, and endless control rooms full of panels with blinking lights. Grant translated what our guide described, but I must admit that after the second control room, my mind wandered a bit. I noticed that Stacey was having a hard time suppressing an occasional yawn.

Finally we were ushered into what must have been their official audience chamber. It was a circular room with walls that glowed with a pallid green light. At intervals around the periphery were placed what appeared to be writhing masses of glowing orange neon tubing, obviously the Casparians' attempt at modern sculpture.

"Goodness," said Stacey, looking about her. "I would just love to get Leonard in here." Leonard is the principal of Leonard's Renaissance, the Boston firm of decorators that had just redone Lands End House in neocolonial revival.

"First of all," said Stacey, "that green is all wrong for a room of this size. I'd do it over in a beige with a few hangings to break the monotony of the curved walls. And those lighted sculptures would have to go. Just one or two pieces by Montrose would be right, I think."

Her musings were interrupted by the entrance of the tallest Casparian we had yet encountered, obviously a creature of some import. He moved forward from a door at the rear of the room and took his place in the central chair. He spoke briefly, his barks coming in an almost senatorial tone. Grant replied before turning to us.

"We are in the presence of the Honored Commander of the Casparian Exploratory Expedition," said Grant. "He welcomes us to his ship and expresses his gratitude to you for providing such a hospitable landing site. On many of the other inhabited worlds they have visited, they have been met by unruly mobs of citizens."

"Well, tell him what we do value at Lands End is our privacy," I said.

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Again there was a short conversation between Grant and the honored commander. "He states their desire to share their technology with us or to perform whatever service we may wish," said Grant.

"I can't think of a thing," I said. "Stacey, is there any object you've seen on our tour that you might covet?"

"No," said Stacey, "nothing that would fit in with the decor at Lands End House."

"I think I should add," said Grant, "that there is a possibility the Casparians might take offense if we refuse anything from them. I would suggest you think of some request they could fulfill, however small."

Upon reconsideration, an interesting thought struck me. "Isn't Pratt Weston's Rembrandt on loan to the Fine Arts?" I said to Stacey.

"Yes," said Stacey. "There was that drooly interview in the *Times* a couple of weeks ago with Pratt carrying on about how priceless it is. The same drivel we get when we go there for dinner."

"Exactly," I said. "Wouldn't it tick old Pratt if we had them to dinner and showed them the *identical* Rembrandt in our dining room?"

"I say," said Stacey, "you mean we get the Casparians to copy it? What a marvelous idea."

"Grant," I said, "see if they would be willing to dash up to Boston and run off a copy of a painting for us."

Grant spoke at some length with the head Casparian and then turned back to us. "They have agreed to your request," he said.

"Splendid," I said.

"There is one formality required," Grant said. "They require your fingerprints on a document. I suspect it is their equivalent of a contract."

"Certainly, certainly," I said, "whatever they want."

A Casparian appeared with a thin metal plate covered with indecipherable symbols.

"Do you wish them to read it to us?" said Grant.

"Heavens no," I said. "No need to listen to a bunch of intergalactic disclaimers."

So Stacey and I pressed our thumbs to the plate, and we were escorted out of the ship to make our way back to Lands End House.

That evening as Stacey and I were sitting on the patio enjoying the sunset over Buzzards Bay and a sip of Sempé Noce d'Argent, Grant appeared with a large package under his arm.

"Ah," I said, "is this the Rembrandt?"

"It is indeed, sir," he said. "And a remarkable likeness to the original, I might add."

Grant unwrapped the painting, and we examined it. It was obviously a very genuine Rembrandt etching.

"Please have it hung in the dining

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room," said Stacey. "Just move the Cézanne on the west wall over to make room."

"Very good, madame," said Grant. But he did not turn to leave. "There is one other matter," he said.

"What's that?" I said.

"Your contract with the Casparians."

"Our contract?" I said.

"The Casparians generally respect the local customs and laws of the planets they visit," Grant said. "However, local laws may be waived if a contract is entered into with an inhabitant."

"Come to the point, Grant," said Stacey.

"The document you impressed with your thumbprints was a contract detailing payment for the Rembrandt," said Grant.

"Beautiful," I said. "It galls me to be flimflammed by a bunch of tasteless aliens, but I suppose I'll have to ante up. Just how much do they want?"

"Unfortunately they seem to have no use for the coin of our realm," said Grant.

"Get on with it, Grant," I said. "Just what do they want?"

"Not what, sir," said Grant. "Whom."

"Whom?" I said.

"I am afraid they want you and the madame."

"They want *us?*" said Stacey.

"So it would appear," said Grant.

"What in heaven's name would they want with us?" said Stacey.

"They have not been specific," said Grant, "but I have gathered from their conversation that they are in the habit of collecting a pair, male and female, from the sentient population of each of the planets they visit. It is against their code of ethics to take such specimens by force. But if a valid contract has been drawn up with members of that population...."

"Enough, Grant," I said. "Enough. It appears we have been thoroughly cozened."

"So it would seem, sir."

"Well," I said to Stacey, "you up for a little jaunt into outer space?"

"Certainly not," said Stacey. "I have no desire to be cooped up for however knows how long in that smelly spaceship."

"That settles that," I said. "We'll just have to think of some way out. I suggest we all sleep on it and see what we can come up with in the morning."

I must admit that before I dozed off, I spent several sleepless hours fruitlessly pursuing possible ways of invalidating our contract with the Casparians. At eight the next morning, I was awakened by my manservant from a too vivid nightmare in which Stacey and I were being welcomed to the Casparian home planet by a tumultuous mob of tentacle-waving inhabitants.

As Grant assisted me with my sar-

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torial selection, I queried him further on the aliens' demands.

"Is there," I said, "something else the Casparians might want more than Stacey and myself?"

"It is difficult to ascertain any physical object they could desire. Anything they would want, they can copy with their machine."

"What about season tickets to the Symphony?" I said.

Grant shook his head. "You know their taste in music."

"What if we just stonewall it?" I said as I stepped into the white flannels that Grant handed me. "We could simply refuse to go."

"They are apparently not averse to using force to back up their contract," said Grant. "They mentioned sclatching the entire East Coast of the United States if we did not abide by their wishes."

"Sclatching?" I said.

"As their technology is far in advance of our own, it is difficult to render an exact translation. I gather it represents some form of ray that destroys all life over large areas."

"The whole East Coast," I said, slipping into the shirt from Sulka's that Grant held for me. "That would certainly put a scotch on the polo season."

"Most definitely, sir."

I had a sudden bright idea. "Why couldn't they copy us?" I said. "So long as they agreed not to bring the copies back. I mean, it would be a bit of a confusion having extra copies of Stacey and myself running about the island."

"Having two identical women, each of whom is under the impression she is the madame, would present a number of difficulties," said Grant as he adjusted my Mark Cross belt. "However, the copying of animate objects is not possible with the Casparian equipment."

"Well," I said, thinking hard, "is there perhaps some personage they might value more than us? Some great intellect, perhaps?"

"I doubt it very much," said Grant. "Yesterday afternoon they were looking over a copy of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity and laughing over its misconceptions. However, your suggestion does bring up one possibility."

"What is that?" I said as I stepped into my loafers from Bally's.

"As you know, the Casparians have been monitoring our radio transmissions for some time. They are thus familiar with our full musical heritage. I have heard them express great admiration for one composer in particular, a gentleman by the name of Rancid Fats."

"Rancid Fats?" I said.

"Yes. He is the lead singer of the Electric Armpit."

"Ah," I said, "the group whose alleged music assailed our taste yesterday morning."

"Exactly," said Grant as he adjusted

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my ascot. "It would be my hope that the Casparians could be persuaded to take Rancid Fats and the entire Electric Armpit back with them as a substitute for you and the madame."

"It sounds like a worthwhile plan," I said. "Not only would it solve our immediate problem, but it would bring respite to the suffering of millions of music lovers. However, I do not see how you plan to accomplish it. We do not have at hand any means of kidnapping this group."

"I expect they might go voluntarily."

"Come now, Grant," I said, "I find that hard to believe."

"I am somewhat acquainted with the habits of the Electric Armpit," Grant replied. "Dr. Pristholm's housekeeper, Eileen, has left popular literature concerning their activities lying about. I have perused some of it, as I feel it is wise to be familiar with deviant behavior in our culture."

I shrugged into the blazer that Grant held up for me. "Certainly an intelligent idea," I said. "And what did you discover?"

"It appears that success has destroyed whatever small moral restraint the members of the Electric Armpit once possessed. I shall not belabor the details of the excesses that are the mainstream of their existence. To quote Rancid Fats himself, 'No trip is too far out for us.'"

"Including, one would hope, a voyage to a distant world," I said.

"Exactly, sir. It is my hope that when approached in the proper way, Rancid Fats and his associates will not be able to resist accompanying our alien friends to their planet of origin."

"Sounds most promising," I said.

"If I may make a suggestion," said Grant as he brushed one final bit of lint from my flannels, "I would be willing to travel to New York City, where the Electric Armpit is currently performing, and attempt to persuade them to come here to the island for a private concert for our alien friends."

"Done and done," I said. "Be off with you today if possible."

When Grant returned on the evening of the following day, we were in the library. I was inspecting a fine lot of Philadelphia Continentals my agent had sent down from Boston. Stacey was deep in her genealogy charts. My manservant entered looking very pleased with himself.

"Well, Grant, out with it," I said. "How did things go?"

"Most satisfactorily, sir."

"Come now, Grant," I said, "a few more details, if you please."

"Certainly, sir. Upon arrival in the metropolis of New York, I went directly to the Paladrome, where the Electric Armpit was performing. The only difficulty I had was in persuading the two gentlemen of a rather rough cut who guarded the entrance that I had legitimate business with

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Mr. Fats. Even mentioning your name seemed to have no salutary effect."

"Cretins," I said. "How did you finally gain admittance?"

"One of the gentlemen finally commented that 'anyone dressed that square has got to be for real.' I was then brought into the presence of Mr. Fats, who was every bit as distasteful an individual as I had expected. However, I maintained a facade of devout respect as I presented your case.

"Mr. Fats appeared perfectly willing to believe that the Casparians had arrived on this planet, but initially seemed uninterested in making their acquaintance. However, I struck upon the idea of pointing out that alien beings might possess interesting new forms of hallucinogenic substances. This carrot seemed to bring the donkey around. Arrangements have been made for the Electric Armpit to give a private concert for our guests a week from this evening."

"You have done very well," I said.

"There remains only one problem with our arrangements," said Grant.

"Problem?" I said.

"Yes," said Grant. "I have taken the liberty of discussing our plans with the Casparians. As I thought, they were delighted with the possibility of having the Electric Armpit return with them to their home planet. However, they felt that in order to free you and the madame from your contractual obligations, they would also require a female specimen to accompany them."

"They are not going to have Stacey," I said. "I am dead set against that."

"That's sweet of you, Francis," said Stacey. "But what about Eileen?"

"Eileen?" I said.

"Yes," said Stacey. "She's supposed to have a lovely voice. We'll let her audition with these Armpit people, and if her performance is successful, she may be invited along on the tour."

"Excellent, excellent," I said. "Not only will we be solving our own problem, we will be giving a talented young person the opportunity of a lifetime. Grant, could you see to making the necessary arrangements?"

I shall pass quickly over the sojourn of the Electric Armpit at Lands End Farms, it being an episode fraught with such unpleasant remembrance. There was no way we could avoid inviting the group for a meal prior to their concert. While it is difficult to pick any individual in the group whose table manners were the most abominable, Rancid Fats himself probably deserved this dubious distinction. He was a youth of pallid features with a great mop of unwashed hair and the attention span of a child of two.

While we did not serve any of the more notable wines in our cellar, they swilled away at the 1978 Rochard we did provide as if it were water, rendering themselves into a state of some inebriation by the end of the meal. As we made our way down to

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the polo field through the warm spring night, I expressed to Grant my concern as to their ability to perform with any coherence. He assured me that drunkenness was their usual state prior to a concert.

A small stage had been constructed a short distance from the Casparian spacecraft. The aliens were seated on low stools they had placed in a semicircle in front. Upon the sight of our troupe, they lashed their tentacles about and gave forth a most offensive sucking sound that Grant informed me signified approbation.

If the reaction of our Casparian friends was any indication, the concert was a total success. They snapped their tentacles in time to the music and uttered the most vulgar of noises as the Electric Armpit wailed out one incomprehensible number after another.

Grant had persuaded the group to permit Eileen to sing in two of their pieces. Their reluctance to allow her participation quickly vanished. The girl's fine musical voice, while thoroughly wasted in rendering the vulgarities composed by Rancid Fats, impressed both the Electric Armpit and the Casparians.

At last the cacophony ended. The Casparians gathered in a circle about the performers. Rancid Fats placed his arm around Eileen's shoulders and spoke to her about the big money that could be hers if she would sign with his group.

The Casparian Expedition commander now stepped forward and presented Rancid Fats with a communicator similar to the one given to Grant. Grant was close beside me to give a running translation of the conversation that followed.

The senior Casparian commenced with a panegyric on the Electric Armpit in general and Rancid Fats in particular. He then proposed that the group return to live on the Casparian home planet, where he assured them of the devotion of the multitudes.

Rancid Fats must have sobered up a bit by this time. While his reply was lavish with praise for his new tentacled fans, he stated he had no desire to leave Earth.

Expressing his overwhelming sadness that the Electric Armpit would not become a permanent fixture on his planet, the Casparian leader now proposed that the group come with them for a short visit, giving his word of honor as a Casparian that Fats would be back before he was a year older.

The leader of the Electric Armpit seemed much more receptive to this proposal. Upon consulting with the rest of the group, general approval was obtained. They hurried off to collect their baggage.

Only Eileen Watkins seemed hesitant. She approached us in some agitation. "Is it all right, do you think, for me to go?" she asked. "It seems like the opportunity of a lifetime."

"It does indeed," said Stacey. "I

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think you should take it."

"But what about Stedman?" said Eileen. "Would he approve?"

"I am sure," said Stacey, "that Dr. Pristholm would not stand in the way of your obtaining a position more in line with your career objectives. Besides, you will be gone but a year."

"I guess you are right," said Eileen. "I'll leave Stedman a note." She hurried off to collect her belongings.

The Casparian crew started rushing about picking up their paraphernalia and loading it into their craft. When the Electric Armpit and Eileen returned, they were quickly hustled on board. A senior Casparian now came forward to extend his thanks to us for our hospitality and to take back the translation device that Grant had worn.

With all aboard, the ramp to the spaceship closed and the craft rose a dozen feet above the field, hung there a few seconds, and then, with a high-pitched whine, accelerated rapidly upward to disappear into the night sky.

"Well," I said to Grant, "I guess that gives us a bit of a respite."

"Respite, sir?" said Grant.

"The Casparians have promised to return Rancid Fats and company within a year. At that point our alien friends may once again insist upon carrying Stacey and myself off with them."

"If that is your concern," said Grant, "you have no need to worry. You are not considering relativistic effects."

"Relativistic effects?" I said.

"Yes," said Grant. "When a ship using a faster-than-light drive turns on such a mechanism, it enters another time dimension. While only a few months may pass for the occupants of the ship, hundreds of years elapse for those located outside of that time frame."

"Are you saying what I think?" I said.

"Yes," said Grant. "After a trip of a year with the Casparians, the Electric Armpit and young Eileen will be returned to Earth several hundred years in our future. Thus, you have no need to be concerned about the Casparians taking away you or the madame."

"Grant," I cried, "this is most unfortunate. If Eileen will not be returning in a year, we shall have to answer to Dr. Pristholm."

I was correct. It was a most agitated Dr. Pristholm whom Grant escorted into our library two days later.

"Awfully sorry you missed the Casparians," I began.

"Where is she?" interrupted Pristholm.

"She?" I said.

"Eileen." His voice broke as he spoke her name. "There was only this when I returned." He waved a piece of paper in my face. "What is this about an opportunity of a lifetime?"

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"Yes, of course," I said, "Miss Watkins. We tried to talk her out of the whole business, but she would be off with those musicians and the Casparians. Back to the home planet for a short visit."

Pristholm now became even more upset. "In their ship with a faster-than-light drive?" he demanded.

"Well, yes," I said. "Seems they pop all over the known universe with it."

"And what about the relativistic effects?" said the scientist in a quavering voice.

"Relativistic effects?" I said.

"Yes, they're probably in another time warp entirely. Who knows when they will be back? She is gone, gone forever." His voice broke into sobs.

I tried to console Pristholm with some man-of-the-world advice on the fickleness of women and the ready availability of others of the fair sex, but I could do nothing to assuage his grief.

Grant, who had been standing impassively viewing this scene, now cleared his throat. "If I might make a suggestion, sir," he said, "there is a possible solution to Dr. Pristholm's dilemma."

Pristholm stopped his sobbing. "There is?" he said.

"Yes," said Grant. "As the Casparians most generously offered us the full benefit of their scientific knowledge, I took the liberty of obtaining from them the plans and description of their faster-than-light drive. Thanks to a most remarkable computer they had on board, they were able to produce the necessary documentation in rather readable English."

"Do you mean...?" said Pristholm, the light of life coming back into his eyes.

"Yes," said Grant. "I have no doubt that someone with a scientific turn of mind could, with these plans, build a ship and drive of his own."

The effect of this statement upon our scientist was remarkable. He straightened up, and the old glazed inventive look came back into his eyes. "By damn," he said, "that is just what I will do."

When Grant fetched his plans and documents, Pristholm seized the bundle and rushed away without so much as a thank-you.

The next week life settled back to the routine at Lands End Farms. Chub Hamilton flew down the Myopia team for our polo match, which went off without incident, although I did have to have the grounds keepers replace a rather large section of turf that had been badly scorched by the Casparian lift-off.

Stacey and I did not wait long before having Pratt and Cynthia Weston down for a weekend. The effect of Pratt's first glimpse of his Rembrandt hanging in our dining room made up somewhat for the inconveniences of the Casparians' visit. After a few minutes of red-faced gasping, he excused

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himself to make a surreptitious telephone call to the Fine Arts to make sure his picture was still on display there. He later recovered himself sufficiently to pretend that he viewed my copy as only a rather poor forgery. I have offered to bring my copy to the Fine Arts, where any experts of his choice could examine the two etchings side by side to ascertain which is the original. Pratt has rather rudely refused even to answer my letter.

Meanwhile the performance of our resident scientist was a classic illustration of the power of unrequited love. Aircraft began delivering all sorts of strange equipment at the airstrip, and a stainless-steel sphere about thirty feet in diameter was soon under construction in the meadow next to Pristholm Hall. During this period Pristholm paid me only one visit. He came bursting into the library one morning without even waiting for Grant to announce him. His laboratory coat was smudged and his hair was a tangle.

"Good to see you, Stedman," I said. "How are things going in the faster-than-light spaceship business?"

Pristholm did not dawdle about with pleasantries. "I require two hundred thousand dollars immediately to buy equipment for my ship," he said. "I propose you purchase Pristholm Hall and the surrounding property for that amount."

"Don't you think that price a bit much?" I said. "I have, after all, already purchased the rights to your property as of your demise."

Pristholm smiled, a distinctly smug expression. "I am afraid that agreement is now essentially worthless," he said.

"Worthless?" I said. "Let me remind you, that contract was drawn up by Nat Greeley, one of the sharpest legal minds in Boston and a senior partner in Greeley, Barton, and Shoat."

"Consider this," said Pristholm, his voice edged with triumph. "I am about to embark upon a journey utilizing the faster-than-light drive given us by the Casparians. I plan to journey to their home planet, regain my Eileen, and return here. However, the relativistic effects will cause a significant time distortion during the trip. According to my calculations, by the time I arrive back here, at least three hundred years of your local time will have elapsed. I shall still be alive at that time, and the property will still belong to me. If you wish to discuss the legality of the matter, I refer your Nat Greeley to my attorney, Charles Nicholson, senior partner of Nicholson, Houghton, and Bliss."

"Ah," I said, "but suppose I do not give you the money you want? You will not be able to build your ship and go off into your time warp or whatever you call it."

"If you do not provide me with the money," said Pristholm, "I shall be forced to go to the government."

"Now, now," I said, "let us not be

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hasty. On rethinking the matter, I can see that two hundred thousand is a very reasonable price for the property. I shall have my attorney draw up the papers immediately."

We did not see our scientist again until a day several weeks later, when I received a call from him inviting us down to witness his departure. When Stacey and I arrived at Pristholm Hall, Stedman was loading the last of his supplies aboard his spherical craft.

"Ah, Francis and Stacey," he said as we approached. "Just wanted to say my good-byes and give you these." He handed me a large bundle of drawings and documents.

"What's this?" I said.

"The drawings and plans for the faster-than-light drive," he said. "Thought you might want them back."

I took the plans from Stedman and handed him our bon voyage present. "Just a couple of bottles of the Delamain from Amalgam's cellar," I said. "Something to help pass the long evenings in space."

"Most kind of you, most kind," said Stedman.

We all shook hands. Stedman climbed into his craft and pulled the door shut behind him. We moved well back. The sphere began to whine and vibrate. It rose a few feet, hovered for a moment, and was gone, straight up into the sky.

When Stacey and I had returned to Lands End House, I called my manservant into the library. "Grant," I said, "I have here the plans for the faster-than-light drive that Dr. Pristholm borrowed. As you were the person who procured them from the Casparians, do you have any suggestions as to their disposition?"

"Most certainly, sir," said Grant. "I have given this matter some thought. If we look at the state of the world today, we see two armed camps, each anxious to destroy the other but kept from that business by the knowledge that each opponent holds the power to totally destroy the other. It is a sorry state of affairs, but one that we must learn to live with, as there appears to be no way —"

"Come to the point, Grant," said Stacey.

"Certainly," said Grant. "It is my feeling that mankind is not ready for a faster-than-light drive. We would use it only to carry our hostile confrontation across the galaxy."

"Then we should destroy the plans?" I said.

"Not necessarily," said Grant. "Your descendants might wish to use them if, for example, the earth were threatened with some cosmic disaster."

"You mean to carry the Pride lineage to some new and distant planet?" said Stacey.

"Exactly, madame," said Grant. "However, care must be taken to prevent the plans from falling into the wrong hands. They should be placed where no government, friend-

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ly or hostile, would think to look for them."

"And you know of such a place?" I said.

"I have a plan," said Grant, "that will sequester the plans in such a place and provide you with a significant financial benefit as well."

"Well, out with it," I said.

Grant explained his plan, and I marveled at its simplicity and elegance. I authorized him to make the necessary telephone calls immediately.

I was thus not particularly surprised when, a week later, Grant ushered into the library a Dr. Winson from the Sedgewick Institution in Washington. He was a chubby little man whose bespectacled countenance radiated scientific goodwill.

"What may I do for you?" I said when we had shaken hands.

"I was looking for Dr. Stedman Pristholm," said Winson, "but I understand he is not at home."

"Yes," I said. "He has embarked on a rather extended trip."

"And when will he be returning?"

"That," I said, "is difficult to know. If you must know, he has left in pursuit of a young lady in the performing arts."

"That is a pity," said Winson. "I am very interested in acquiring some of the models of his inventions and those of his father, Eric Pristholm."

"Well," I said, "I can help you there. Prior to his departure, Dr. Pristholm sold me Pristholm Hall and all of its contents in order to finance his trip."

"Ah," said Winson with a slight smile, "not the first man to lose his senses over some diva."

"Something like that," I said. "However, I cannot understand why you would be interested in the Pristholm inventions. To my knowledge not one of them was ever of any practical use."

"Exactly, exactly," said Winson, rubbing his palms together in the universal sign of greed. "While the Sedgewick Institution is the official government repository of the handiwork of this nation's most successful scientists, we are also interested in those inventors whose work has led only up blind alleys. In fact, we are currently putting together a special exhibit to be titled 'Fumbles, Failures, and Follies.' It will display for the public examples of inventors who spent their lives in pursuit of fruitless dreams."

"You will certainly find plenty of examples of such work in Pristholm Hall," I said. "Let me have my manservant take you down there."

Two hours later Winson was back, a happy smile on his face and, as Grant had predicted, the plans for the faster-than-light drive under his arm.

"I cannot believe my success," he said, unrolling the plans. "Do you realize what this is?"

"It says 'Faster-than-Light Space-

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ship Plans,'" I said.

"Precisely." Winson beamed with pleasure. "The work that has gone into this folly is incredible. If you are willing to donate these plans and a few of the perpetual-motion machine models built by Eric Pristholm to the Sedgewick, we shall make them the centerpiece of the exhibit. I think 'Two Generations of Futility' might make a suitable title."

"Well," I said, "I certainly do want to make a contribution to the history of science. But plans of this detail must represent years of expensive effort. What value would you put on the items you wish for your exhibit?"

"Oh, I would say at least ten thousand dollars," said Winson.

"Make it a hundred thousand and you have a deal," I said.

"You drive a hard bargain," said Winson, "but I think we could appraise the items in question as having that value."

"Done and done," I said, "I shall have my attorneys draw up the necessary papers immediately." I did not point out that by granting me that little deduction, the government had deprived itself of roughly fifty thousand of my taxes.

As I understand, the exhibition was a great success. The exhibit materials are now safely ensconced in the Sedgewick archives.

In closing I wish to address a final note to whoever of the Pride descendants may be reading this manuscript. You now know the full story of our extraterrestrial visitors and their general lack of trustworthiness should they return. Of course, if you are of a scientific bent and looking for a bit of adventure of your own in outer space, you have but to drop in on the Sedgewick Institution. There, filed away under useless inventions, you will find the plans for your ship. Good luck ... and bon voyage.

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Jane Yolen's fresh and compelling variation on a classic Arthurian theme will appear in her new collection, MERLIN'S BOOKE, to be published in 1986 by Ace Books.

The Sword and the Stone

BY
JANE YOLEN

"Would you believe a sword in a stone, my liege?" the old necromancer asked. "I dreamed of one last night. Stone white as whey, with a sword stuck in the top like a knife through butter. It means something. My dreams always mean something. Do you believe that stone and that sword, my lord?"

The man on the carved wooden throne sighed heavily, his breath causing the hairs of his mustache to flap. "Merlinus, I have no time to believe in a sword in a stone. Or on a stone. Or under a stone. I'm just too damnably tired for believing today. And you *always* have dreams."

"This dream is different, my liege."

"They're always different. But I've just spent half a morning pacifying two quarreling *dux bellorum*. Or is it *bellori*?"

"*Belli*," muttered the mage, shaking his head.

"Whatever. And sorting out five counterclaims from my chief cook and his mistresses. He should stick to his kitchen. His affairs are a mess. And awarding grain to a lady whose miller maliciously killed her cat. Did you know, Merlinus, that we actually have a law about cat killing that levies a fine of the amount of grain that will cover the dead cat completely when it is held up by the tip of its tail and its nose touches the ground? It took over a peck of grain." He sighed again.

"A large cat, my lord," mumbled the mage.

"A *very* large cat indeed," agreed the king, letting his head sink into his hand. "And a *very* large lady. With a lot of *very* large and important lands. Now what in Mithras's name do I want a sword and a stone for when I have to deal with all that?"

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"In *Christ's* name, my lord. *Christ's* name. Remember, we are Christians now." The mage held up a gnarled forefinger. "And it is a sword *in* a stone."

"*You* are the Christian," the king said. "*I* still drink bull's blood with my men. It makes them happy, though the taste of it is somewhat less than good claret." He laughed mirthlessly. "And yet I wonder how good a Christian you are, Merlinus, when you still insist on talking to trees. Oh, there are those who have seen you walking in your wood and talking, always talking, even though there is no one there. Once a druid, always a druid, so Sir Kay says."

"Kay is a fool," answered the old man, crossing himself quickly as if marking the points of the body punctuated his thought.

"Kay is a fool indeed, but even fools have ears and eyes. Go away, Merlinus, and do not trouble me with this sword on a stone. I have more important things to deal with." He made several dismissing movements with his left hand while summoning the next petitioner with his right. The petitioner, a young woman with a saucy smile and a bodice bouncing with promises, moved forward. The king smiled back.

Merlinus left and went outside, walking with more care than absolutely necessary, to the grove beyond the castle walls where his favorite oak grew. He addressed it rather informally, they being of a long acquaintance.

"*Salve, amice frondifer* — greetings, friend leaf-bearer. What am I to do with that boy? When I picked him out, it was because the blood of a strong-minded and lusty king ran in his veins, though on the sinister side. Should I then have expected gratitude and imagination to accompany such a heritage? Ah, but unfortunately I did. My brains must be rotting away with age. Tell me, *e glande nate*, sprout of an acorn, do I ask too much? Vision! That's what is missing, is it not?"

A rustle of leaves, as if a tiny wind puzzled through the grove, was his only answer.

Merlinus sat down at the foot of the tree and rubbed his back against the bark, easing an itch that had been there since breakfast. He tucked the skirt of his woolen robe between his legs and stared at his toes. He still favored the Roman summer sandals, even into late fall, because closed boots tended to make the skin crackle between his toes like old parchment. And besides, in the heavy boots his feet sweat and stank. But he always felt cold now, winter and summer. So he wore a woolen robe year-round.

"Did I address him incorrectly, do you think? These new kings are such sticklers for etiquette. An old man like me finds that stuff boring. Such a waste of time, and time is the one commodity I have so little of." He

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ubbed a finger alongside his nose.

"I thought to pique his interest, to ;et him wondering about a sword hat is stuck in a stone like a knife in a lab of fresh beef. A bit of legerde-nain, that, and I'm rather proud of it, ctually. You see, it wasn't *just* a lream. I've done it, up in my tower oom. Anyone with a bit of knowl-:dge can read the old Latin building nanuals and construct a ring of stones. Building the baths under the castle vas harder work. But that sword in he stone — yes, I'm rather proud of t. And what that young king has got o realize is that he needs to do something more than rule on cases of quarreling dukes and petty mistresses ind grasping rich widows. He has o . . ." Stopping for a minute to listen o the wind again through the trees, Merlinus shook his head and went on. "He has to fire up these silly ribes, give them something magical o rally them. I don't mean him to be ust another petty chieftain. Oh, no. He's to be my greatest creation, that boy." He rubbed his nose again.

"My last creation, I'm afraid. If his one doesn't work out, what am I o do?"

The wind, now stronger, soughed hrough the trees.

"I was given just thirty-three years o bind this kingdom, you know. That's he charge the geas laid on me: thirty-hree years to bind it *per crucem et quercum*, by cross and by oak. And his, alas, is the last year."

A cuckoo called down from the limb over his head.

"The first one I tried was that idiot Uther. Why, his head was more wood than thine." The old man chuckled to himself. "And then there were those twins from the Hebrides who enjoyed games so much. Then that witch, Morgana. She made a pretty mess of things. I even considered — at her prompting — her strange dark little son. Or was he her nephew? I forget which. When one has been a lifelong celibate as I, one tends to dismiss such frequent and casual couplings and their messy aftermaths as unimportant. But that boy had a sly, foxy look about him. Nothing would follow him but a pack of dogs. And then I found this one right under my nose. In some ways he's the dullest of the lot, and yet in a king dullness can be a virtue. *If* the crown is secure."

A nut fell on his head, tumbled down his chest, and landed in his lap. It was a walnut, which was indeed strange, since he was sitting beneath an oak. Expecting magic, the mage looked up. There was a little red squirrel staring down at him. Merlinus cracked the nut between two stones, extracted the meat, and held up half to the squirrel.

"Walnuts from acorn trees," he said. As soon as the squirrel had snatched away its half of the nutmeat, the old man drifted off in a dream-filled sleep.

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"Wake up, wake up, old one." It was the shaking, not the sentence, that woke him. He opened his eye. A film of sleep lent a soft focus to his vision. The person standing over him seemed haloed in mist.

"Are you all right, grandfather?" The voice was soft, too.

Merlinus sat up. He was, he guessed, too old to be sleeping out-of-doors. The ground cold had seeped into his bones. Like an old tree, his sap ran sluggishly. But being caught out by a youngster made him grumpy. "Why shouldn't I be all right?" he answered, more gruffly than he meant.

"You are so thin, grandfather, and you sleep so silently. I feared you dead. One should not die in a sacred grove. It offends the Goddess."

"Are you, then, a worshipper of the White One?" he asked, carefully watching the stranger's hands. No true worshiper would answer that question in a straightforward manner, but would instead signal the dark secret with an inconspicuous semaphore. But all that the fingers signed were concern for him. Forefinger, fool's finger, physics finger, ear finger were silent of secrets. Merlinus sighed and struggled to sit upright.

The stranger put a hand under his arm and back and gently eased him into a comfortable position. Once up, Merlinus took a better look. The stranger was a boy with that soft, lambent cheek not yet coarsened by a beard. His eyes were the clear blue of speedwells. The eyebrows were dark swal low wings, sweeping high and back toward luxuriant and surprisingly golc hair caught under a dark cap. He wa: dressed in homespun, but neat anc clean. His hands, clasped before him were small and well-formed.

Sensing the mage's inspection, the boy spoke. "I have come in the hope: of becoming a page at court."

"Catomite! Merlinus thought, bu did not speak aloud. The Romans hac much to answer for. It was not al roadways and baths.

But, as if anticipating the old man': rising disgust, the boy added, "I wish to learn the sword and lance, and have sworn myself to purity till I be pledged."

Merlinus's mouth screwed about a bit, but at last settled into a passable smile. Perhaps he could find some use for the boy. A wedge properly placed had been known to split a mighty tree. And he had so little time. "What is your name, boy?"

"I am called . . . " There was a hesitation, scarcely noticeable. "Gawen."

Merlinus's smile broadened. "Ah but we have already a great knight by a similar name. He is praised as one of the king's Three Fearless Men."

"Fearless in bed, certainly," the boy answered. "The hollow man." Then, as if to soften his words, he added, "Or so it is said where I come from."

So, Merlinus thought, *there may*

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be more to this than a child come to court. Aloud, he said, "And where *do* you come from?"

The boy looked down and smoothed the homespun where it lay against his thighs. "The coast."

Refusing to comment that the coast was many miles long both north and south, Merlinus said sharply, "Do not condemn a man with another's words. And do not praise him that way, either."

The boy did not answer.

"Purity in tongue must proceed purity in body," the mage added, for the boy's silence annoyed him. "That is my first lesson to you."

A small, sulky voice answered him. "I am too old for lessons."

"None of us is too old," said Merlinus, wondering why he felt so compelled to go on and on. Then, as if to soften his criticism, he added, "Even I learned something today."

"And that is . . . ?

"It has to do with the Matter of Britain," the mage said, "and is therefore beyond you."

"Why beyond me?"

"Give me your hand." He held his own out, crabbed with age.

Gawen reluctantly put his small hand forward, and the mage ran a finger across the palm, slicing the lifeline where it forked early.

"I see you are no stranger to work. The calluses tell me that. But what work it is I do not know."

Gawen withdrew his hand and smiled brightly, his mouth wide, mobile, telling of obvious relief.

Merlinus wondered what other secrets the hand might have told him could he have read palms as easily as a village herbwife. Then, shaking his head, he stood.

"Come. Before I bring you into court, let us go and wash ourselves in the river."

The boy's eyes brightened. "*You* can bring me to court?"

With more pride than he felt and more hope than he had any right to feel, Merlinus smiled. "Of course, my son. After all, I am the High King's mage."

They walked companionably to the river which ran noisily between stones. Willows on the bank wept their leaves into the swift current. Merlinus used the willow trunks for support as he sat down carefully on the bank. He eased his feet, sandals and all, into the cold water. It was too far and slippery for him to stand.

"Bring me enough to bathe with," he said, pointing to the water. It could be a test of the boy's quick-wittedness.

Gawen stripped off his cap, knelt down, and held the cap in the river. Then he pulled it out and wrung the water over the old man's hands.

Merlinus liked that. The job had been done, and quickly, with little wasted motion. Another boy might

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have plunged into the river, splashing like an untrained animal. Or asked what to do.

The boy muttered, "*De Matri a Patre*."

Startled, Merlinus looked up into the clear, untroubled blue eyes. "You know Latin?"

"Did I . . . did I say it wrong?"

"From the Mother to the Father."

"That is what I meant." Gawen's young face was immediately transformed by the wide smile. "The . . . the brothers taught me."

Merlinus knew only two monasteries along the coast, and they were very far away. The sisters of Quintern Abbey were much closer, but they never taught boys. This child, thought the mage, has come a very long way indeed. Aloud, he said, "They taught you well."

Gawen bent down again, dripped the can once more, and this time used the water to wash his own face and hands. Then he wrung the cap out thoroughly, but did not put it back on his head. Cap in hand, he faced the mage. "You *will* bring me to the High King, then?"

A sudden song welled up in Merlinus's breast, a high hallelujah so unlike any of the dark chantings he was used to under the oaks. "I will," he said.

As they neared the castle, the sun was setting. It was unusually brilliant, rain and fog being the ordinary settings for evenings in early fall. The high tor, rumored to be hollow, was haloed with gold and loomed up behind the topmost towers.

Gawen gasped at the high timbered walls.

Merlinus smiled to himself but said nothing. For a child from the coast, such walls must seem near miraculous. But for the competent architect who planned for eternity, mathematics was miracle enough. He had long studied the writing of the Roman builders, whose prose styles were as tedious as their knowledge was great. He had learned from them how to instruct men in the slotting of breastwork timbers. All he needed was an ability to read — and time. Yet time, he thought bitterly, for construction as with everything else had all but run out for him. Still, there was this boy — and this *now*.

"Come," said the mage. "Stand tall and enter."

The boy squared his shoulders, and he and Merlinus hammered upon the carved wooden doors together.

Having first checked the waiting pair out through the spyhole, the guards opened the doors with a desultory air that marked them at the end of their watch.

"*Ave*", Merlinus," said one guard with an execrable accent. It was obvious he knew that much Latin and no more. The other guard was silent.

Gawen was silent as well, but his

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small silence was filled with wonder. Merlinus glanced slantwise and saw the boy taking in the great stoneworks, the Roman mosaic panel on the entry wall, all the fine details he had insisted upon. He remembered the argument with Morgana when they had built that wall.

"An awed emissary," he had told her, "is already half won over."

At least she had had the wit to agree, though later her wits had been addled by drugs and wine and the gods only knew what other excesses. Merlinus shook his head. It was best to look forward, not back, when you have so little time. Looking backward was an old man's drug.

He put his hand on the boy's shoulder, feeling the fine bones beneath the jerkin. "Turn here," he said softly.

They turned into the long, dark walkway where the walls were niched for the slide of three separate portcullises. No invaders could break in this way. Merlinus was proud of the castle's defenses.

As they walked, Gawen's head was constantly aswivel: left, right, up, and down. Wherever he had come from had left him unprepared for this. At last the hall opened into an inner courtyard where pigs, poultry, and wagons vied for space.

Gawen breathed out again. "It's like home," he whispered.

"Eh?" Merlinus let out a whistle of air like a skin bag deflating.

"Only finer, of course." The quick answer almost satisfied, but not quite. And Merlinus was not one to enjoy unsolved puzzles.

"To the right," the old man growled, shoving his finger hard into the boy's back. "To the right."

They were ushered into the throne room without a moment's hesitation. This much, at least, a long memory and a reputation for magic making and king making had brought him.

The king looked up from a paper he was laboriously reading, his finger marking his place. He always, Merlinus noted with regret, read well behind that finger, for he had come to reading as a grown man, and reluctantly, his fingers faster in all activities than his mind. But he *was* well-meaning, the mage reminded himself. Just a bit sluggish on the uptake. A king should be faster than his advisers, though he seem to lean upon them; quicker than his knights, though he seem to send them on ahead.

"Ah, Merlinus, I am glad you are back. There's a dinner tonight with an emissary from the Orkneys, and you know how I have trouble understanding their rough-mangling of English. You will be there?"

Merlinus nodded.

"And there is a contest I need your advice on. Here." He snapped his fingers, and a list was put into his hand. "The men want to choose a May queen to serve next year. I think they are hoping to thrust her on me as a queen. They have drawn up a list

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of those qualities they think she should possess. Kay wrote the list down."

Kay, Merlinus thought disagreeably, was the only one of that crew who *could* write, and his spelling was only marginally better than his script. He took the list and scanned it:

Thre things smalle — headde, nose, breestes;
Thre things largge — waiste, hippes, calves;
Thre thingges longge — haires, finggers, thies;
Three thingges short — height, toes, utterance.

"Sounds more like an animal in a bestiary than a girl, my lord," Merlinus ventured at last.

Gawen giggled.

"They are trying. . . ." the king began. "They certainly are," muttered the mage.

"They are trying . . . to be helpful, Merlinus." The king glowered at the boy by the mage's side. "And who is this fey bit of work?"

The boy bowed deeply. "I am called Gawen, sire, and I have come to learn to be a knight."

The king ground his teeth. "And some of them, no doubt, will like you benights."

A flush spread across the boy's cheeks. "I am sworn to the Holy Mother to be pure," he said.

"Are you a grailer or a goddess worshiper?" Before the boy could answer, the king turned to Merlinus. "Is he well bred?"

"Of course," said Merlinus, guessing. The Latin and the elegant speech said as much, even without the slip about how much a castle looked like home.

"Very well," the king said, arching his back and putting one hand behind him. "Damned throne's too hard. I think I actually prefer a soldier's pallet. Or a horse." He stood and stretched. That's enough for one day. I will look at the rest tomorrow."He put out a hand and steadied himself using the mage's shoulder, then descended the two steps to the ground. Whispering in Merlinus's right ear, because he knew the left ear was a bit deafened by age, the king said, "When you gave me the kingdom, you forgot to mention that kings need to sit all day long. You neglected to tell me about wooden thrones. If you had told me that when you offered me the crown, I might have thought about it a bit longer."

"And would have made a different choice, my lord?" asked Merlinus, quietly.

The king laughed, and said aloud, "No, but I would have requested a different throne."

Merlinus looked shocked. "But this is the High King's throne. Without it, you would not be recognized."

The king nodded.

Gawen, silent until this moment,

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spoke up. "Would not a cushion atop the throne do? Like the crown atop the High King's head?"

The king's hand went immediately to the heavy circlet of metal on his head. Then he swept it off, shook out his long blond locks, and laughed. "Of course. A cushion. Out of the mouths of babes . . . it would do, would it not, Merlinus?"

The mage's mouth twisted about the word. "Cushion." But he could think of no objection. It was the quiet homeyness of the solution that offended him. But certainly it would work.

Merlinus put aside his niggling doubts about the boy Gawen and turned instead to the problem at hand: making the king accept the magic of the sword in the stone.

"I beg you, sire," the old mage said the next morning, "to listen." He accompanied his request with a bow on bended knee. The pains of increasing age were only slightly mitigated by some tisanes brewed by a local herbwife. Merlinus sighed heavily as he went down. It was that sigh, sounding so much like his old grandfather's, that decided the king.

"All right, all right, Merlinus. Let us see this sword and this stone."

"It is in my workroom," Merlinus said. "If you will accompany me there." He tried to stand and could not.

"I will not only accompany you," said the king patiently. "It looks as if I will have to carry you." He came down from his throne and lifted the old man up to his feet.

"I can walk," Merlinus said, somewhat testily.

Arm in arm, they wound through the castle halls, up three flights of stone stairs, to Merlinus's tower workroom.

The door opened with a spoken spell and three keys. The king seemed little impressed.

"*There*!" said the mage, pointing to a block of white marble with veins of red and green running through. Sticking out of the stone top was the hilt of a sword. The hilt was carved with wonderful runes. On the white marble face was the legend:

WHOSO PULLETH OUTE
THIS SWERD OF THIS STONE
IS RIGHTWYS KYNGE BORNE OF
ALL BRYTAGNE

Slowly the king read aloud, his finger tracing the letters in the stone. When he had finished, he looked up. "But *I* am king of all Britain."

"Then pull the sword, sire."

The king smiled, and it was not a pleasant smile. He was a strong man, in his prime, and except for his best friend Sir Lancelot, was reputed to be the strongest in the kingdom. It was one of the reasons Merlinus had chosen him. He put his hand to the hilt,

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tightened his fingers around it until the knuckles were white, and pulled. The sword remained in the stone.

"Merlinus, this is witchery. I will not have it." His voice was cold.

"And with *witchery* you will pull it out in full view of admiring throngs. You — and no one else." The mage smiled benignly.

The king let go of the sword. "But why this? I am *already* king."

"Because I hear grumblings in the kingdom. Oh, do not look slantwise at me, boy. It is not magic but reliable spies that tell me so. There are those who refuse to follow you, to be bound to you and so bind this kingdom, because they doubt the legitimacy of your claim."

The king snorted. "And are they right, Merlinus. I am king because the Arch-Mage wills it. *Per crucem et quercum.*"

Startled, Merlinus asked, "How did you know that?"

"Oh, my old friend, do you think you are the only one with reliable spies?"

Merlinus stared into the king's eyes. "Yes, you are right. You are king because I willed it. And because you earned it. But this bit of legerdemain. . . ."

"Witchery!" interrupted the king.

Merlinus persisted. "This *legerdemain* will have them all believing in you." He added quickly: "As I do. *All* of them. To bind the kingdom, you *all* the tribes to follow you."

The king looked down and then, as if free of the magic for a moment, turned and stared out of the tower window to the north, where winter was already creeping down the mountainsides. "Do those few tribes matter? The ones who paint themselves blue and squat naked around small fires? The ones who wrap themselves in woolen blankets and blow noisily into animal bladders and call it a song? The ones who dig out shelled fish with the toes and eat the fish raw? Do we really want to bring them to our kingdom?"

"They are all part of Britain. The Britain of which you are the king now and for the future."

The king shifted his gaze from the mountains to the guards walking his donjon walls. "Are you positive I shall be able to draw the sword? I will *not* be made a mockery to satisfy some hidden purpose of yours."

"Put your hand on the sword, sire."

The king turned slowly as if the words had a power to command him. He walked back to the marble. It seemed to glow. He reached out and then, before his hand touched the hilt, by an incredible act of will, he stopped. "I am a good soldier, Merlinus. And I love this land."

"I know."

With a resonant slap the king's hand grasped the sword. Merlinus muttered something in a voice as soft as a cradle song. The sword slid noise-

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lessly from the stone.

Holding the sword above his head, the king put his left hand to the hilt as well. He hefted the sword several times and made soft, comfortable noises deep in his chest. Then, carefully, like a woman threading a needle, he slid the sword back into its slot in the stone.

"I will have my men take this and place it before the great cathedral so that all might see it. *All* my people shall have a chance to try their hands."

"All?"

"Even the ones who paint themselves blue or blow into bladders or do other disgusting and uncivilized things." The King smiled. "I shall even let mages try."

Merlinus smiled back. "Is that wise?"

"I am the one with the strong arm, Merlinus. You are to provide the wisdom. And the witchery."

"Then let the mages try, too," Merlinus said. "For all the good it will do them."

"It is a fine sword, Merlinus. It shall honor its wielder." He put his hand back on the hilt and heaved. The sword did not move.

The soldiers, with no help from Merlinus, moaned and pushed and sweated and pulled until, at last, they managed to remove the sword-and-stone with a series of rollers and ropes. At the king's request, it was set up in front of the great cathedral in the center of the town outside the castle walls. News of it was carried by carters and jongleurs, gleemen and criers from castle to castle and town to town. Within a month the hilt of the sword was filthy from the press of hundreds of hands. It seemed that in the countryside there were many who would be king.

Young Gawen took it upon himself to clean the hilt whenever he had time. He polished the runes on the stone lovingly, too, and studied the white marble from all angles. But he never put his hand to the sword as if to pull it. When the king was told of this, he smiled and his hand strayed to the cushion beneath him.

Gawen reported on the crowds around the stone to Merlinus as he recounted his other lessons.

"Helm, aventail, byrnie, gauntlet, cuisses . . . ." he recited, touching the parts of his body where the armor would rest. "And Arch-Mage, there was a giant of a man there today, dressed all in black, who tried the sword. And six strange tribesmen with blue skin and necklaces of shells. Two of them tried to pull together. The sword would not come out, but their blue dye did. I had a horrible time getting it off the hilt. And Sir Kay came."

"Again?"

The boy laughed. "It was his sixth try. He waits until it is dinnertime and no one in the square."

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The old mage nodded at every word. "Tell me again."

"About Sir Kay?"

"About the parts of the armor. You must have the lesson perfect for tomorrow."

The boy's mouth narrowed as he began. "Helm, aventail. . . ."

At each word, Merlinus felt a surge of pride and puzzlement. Though the recitation was an old one, it sounded new and somehow different in Gawen's mouth.

They waited until the night of the solstice, when the earth sat poised between night and night. Great bonfires were lit in front of the cathedral to drive back the darkness while, inside, candles were lighted to do the same.

"It is time," Merlinus said to the king without any preliminaries.

"It is always time," answered the king, placing his careful marks on the bottom of yet another piece of parchment.

"I mean time to pull the sword from the stone." Merlinus offered his hand to the king.

Pushing aside the offer, the king rose.

"I see you use the cushion now," Merlinus said.

"It helps somewhat." He stretched. "I only wish I had two of them."

The mage shook his head. "You are the king. Command the second."

The king looked at him steadily. "I doubt such excess is wise."

Remembering Morgana, the mage smiled.

They walked arm in arm to the waiting horses. Merlinus was helped onto a gray whose broad back was more like a chair than a charger. But then, he had always been ill at ease on horseback. And horses, even the ones with the calmest dispositions, sensed some strangeness in him. They always shied.

The king strode to his own horse, a barrel-chested bay with a smallish head. It had been his mount when he was a simple soldier, and he had resisted all attempts to make him ride another.

"Mount up," the king called to his guards.

Behind him his retinue mounted. Sir Kay was the first to vault into the saddle. Young Gawen, astride a present from the king, was the last.

With a minimum of fuss, they wound along the path down the hillside toward the town, and only the clopping of hooves on dirt marked their passage. Ahead were torchbearers, and behind them came the household, each with a candle. So light came to light, a wavering parade to the waiting stone below.

In the fire-broken night, the white stone gleamed before the black hulk of the cathedral. The darker veins in the stone meandered like faery streams across its surface. The sword

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— now shadow, now light — was the focus of hundreds of eyes. And, as if pulled by some invisible string, the king rode directly to the stone, dismounted, and knelt before it. Then he removed his circlet of office and shook free the long golden mane it had held so firmly in place. When he stood again, he put the crown on top of the stone so that it lay just below the angled sword.

The crowd fell still.

"This crown and this land belong to the man who can pull the sword from the stone," the king said, his voice booming into the strange silence. "So it is written. Here." He gestured broadly with his hand toward the runes.

"Read it," cried a woman's voice from the crowd.

"We want to hear it," shouted another.

A man's voice, picking up the argument, dared a further step. "We want the mage to read it." Anonymity lent his words power. The crowd muttered its agreement.

Merlinus dismounted carefully and, after adjusting his robes, walked to the stone. He glanced only briefly at the words on its side, then turned to face the people.

"The message on the stone is burned here," he said, pointing to his breast, "Here in my heart. It says: 'Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone is rightwise king born of all Britain.'"

Sir Kay nodded and said loudly, "Yes, that is what it says. Right."

The king put his hands on his hips. "And so, good people, the challenge has been thrown down before us all. He who would be king of all Britain must step forward and put his hand on the sword."

At first there was no sound at all but the dying echo of the king's voice. Then a child cried, and that started the crowd. They began talking to one another, jostling, arguing, some good-naturedly and others with a belligerent tone. Finally a rather sheepish farm boy, taller by almost a head than Sir Kay, who was the tallest of the knights, was thrust from the crowd. He had a shock of wheat-colored hair over one eye and a dimple in his chin.

"I'd like to try, my lord," he said. He was plainly uncomfortable having to talk to the king. "I mean, it wouldn't do no harm."

"No harm indeed, son," said the king. He took the boy by the elbow and escorted him to the stone.

The boy put both his hands around the hilt and then stopped. He looked over his shoulder at the crowd. Someone shouted encouragement, and then a whole push of people began to call out to him.

"Do it. Pull the bastard. Give it a heave. Haul it out." Their cries came thick now, and buoyed by their excitment, the boy put his right foot up against the stone. Then he leaned

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backward and pulled. His hands slipped along the hilt, and he fell onto his bottom, to the delight of the crowd.

Crestfallen, the boy stood up. He stared unhappily at his worn boots as if he did not know where else to look or how to make his feet carry him away.

The king put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "What is your name, son?" The gentleness in his voice silenced the crowd's laughter.

"Percy, sir," the boy managed at last.

"Then, Percy," said the king, "because you were brave enough to try where no one else would set hand on the sword, you shall come to the castle and learn to be one of my knights."

"Maybe not *your* knight," someone shouted from the crowd.

A shadow passed over the king's face, and he turned toward the mage.

Merlinus shook his head imperceptibly and put his finger to his lips.

The king shifted his gaze back to the crowd. He smiled. "No, perhaps not. We shall see. Who else would try?"

At last, Sir Kay brushed his hand across his breastplate. He alone of the court still affected the Roman style. Tugging his gloves down so that the fingers fitted snugly, he walked to the stone and placed his right hand on the hilt. He gave it a slight tug, smoothed his golden mustache with the fingers of his left hand, then reached over with his left hand and with both gave a mighty yank. The sword did not move.

Kay shrugged and turned toward the king, "But I am still first in your service," he said.

"And in my heart, brother," acknowledged the king.

Then, one by one, the knights lined up and took turns pulling on the sword. Stocky Bedevere, handsome Gawain, Tristan maned like a lion, cocky Galahad, and the rest. But the sword, ever firm in its stone scabbard, never moved.

At last, of all the court's knights, only Lancelot was left.

"And you, good Lance, my right hand, strongest of us all, will you not try?" asked the king.

Lancelot, who disdained armor except in battle and was dressed in a simple tunic, the kind one might dance in, shook his head. "I have no wish to be king. I wish only to be of service."

The king walked over to him and put his hand on Lancelot's shoulder. He whispered into the knight's ear. "It is the stone's desire, not ours, that will decide this. But if you do *not* try, then my leadership will always be in doubt. Without your full commitment to this cause, the kingdom will not be bound."

"Then I will put my hand to it, my lord," Lancelot said. "Because you require it, not because I desire it." He shuttered his eyes.

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"Do not just put your hand there. You must *try* damn you," the king whispered fiercely. "You must really try."

Lancelot opened his eyes, and some small fire, reflecting perhaps from the candles or the torches or the solstice flames, seemed to glow there for a moment. Then, in an instant, the fire in his eyes was gone. He stepped up to the stone, put his hand to the sword, and seemed to address it. His lips moved, but no sound came out. Taking a deep breath, he pulled. Then, letting the breath out slowly, he leaned back.

The stone began to move.

The crowd gasped in a single voice.

"*Arthur*. . . ." Kay began, his hand on the king's arm.

Sweat appeared on Lancelot's brow, and the king could feel an answering band of sweat on his own. He could feel the weight of Lancelot's pull between his own shoulder blades, and he held his breath with the knight.

The stone began to slide along the courtyard mosaic, but the sword did not slip from its mooring. It was a handle for the stone, nothing more. After a few inches the stone stopped moving. Lancelot withdrew his hand from the hilt, bowed slightly toward the king, and took two steps back.

"I cannot unsheath the king's sword," he said. His voice was remarkably level for a man who had just moved several tons of stone.

"Is there no one else?" asked Merlinus, slowly looking around.

No one in the crowd dared to meet his eyes, and there followed a long, full silence.

Then, from the left, came a familiar light voice. "Let King Arthur try." It was Gawen.

At once the crowd picked up its cue. "Arthur! Arthur! Arthur!" they shouted. And, wading into their noise like a swimmer in heavy swells breasting the waves, the king walked to the stone. Putting his right hand on the sword hilt, he turned his face to the people.

"For Britain!" he cried.

Merlinus nodded, crossed his forefingers, and sighed a spell in Latin.

Arthur pulled. With a slight *whoosh* the sword slid out of the slot. He put his left hand above his right on the hilt and swung the sword over his head once, twice, and then a third time. Then he brought it slowly down before him until its point touched the earth.

"Now I be king. Of *all* Britain," he said.

Kay picked up the circlet from the stone and placed it on Arthur's head, and the chant of his name began anew. But even as he was swept up, up, up into the air by Kay and Lancelot, to ride their shoulders above the crowd, Arthur's eyes met the mage's. He whispered fiercely to Merlinus, who could read his lips though his

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voice could scarcely carry against the noise.

"I will see you in the tower. Tonight!"

Merlinus was waiting when, two hours later, the king slipped into his room, the sword in his left hand.

"So now you are king of all Britain indeed," said Merlinus. "And none can say you no. Was I not right? A bit of legerdemain and. . . ."

The king's face was gray in the room's candlelight. "Merlinus, you do not understand? I am *not* the king. There is another."

"Another what?" asked the mage.

"Another king. Another sword."

Merlinus shook his head. "You are tired, Lord. It has been a long day and an even longer night."

Arthur came over and grabbed the old man's shoulder with his right hand. "Merlinus, *this is not the same sword."*

"My lord, you are mistaken. It can be no other."

Arthur swept the small crown off his head and dropped it into the mage's lap. "I am a simple man, Merlinus, and I am an honest one. I do not know much, though I am trying to learn more. I read slowly and understand only with help. What I am best at is soldiering. What I know best is swords. The sword I held months ago in my hands is not the sword I hold now. That sword had a balance to it, a grace such as I have never felt before. It knew me, knew my hand. There was a pattern on the blade that looked now like wind, now like fire. This blade, though it has fine watering, looks like nothing.

"I am not an imaginative man, Merlinus, so I am not imagining this. This is not the sword that was in the stone. And if it is not, where is that sword? And what man took it? For he, not I, is the rightful-born king of all Britain. And I would be the first in the land to bend my knee to him."

Merlinus put his hand to his head and stared at the crown in his lap. "I swear to you, Arthur, no man alive could move that sword from the stone lest I spoke the words."

There was a slight sound from behind the heavy curtains bordering the window, and a small figure emerged holding a sword in two hands. "I am afraid that I took the sword, my lords."

"Gawen!" cried Merlinus and Arthur at once.

The boy knelt before Arthur and held up the sword before him.

Arthur bent down and pulled the boy up. The sword was between them.

"It is I should kneel to you, my young king."

Gawen shook his head, and a slight flush covered his cheeks. "I cannot be king now or ever. Not *Rex Quondam Rexque Futurus."*

"How pulled you the sword, then?" Merlinus asked. "Speak."

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The boy placed the sword in Arthur's hands. "I brought a slab of butter to the stone one night and melted the butter over candle flames. When it was a river of gold, I poured it into the slot and the sword slid out. Just like that."

"A trick. A homey trick that any herbwife . . . ." Merlinus began.

Arthur turned on him, sadly. "No more a trick, mage, than I pulling a sword loosed by your spell. The boy is, in fact, the better of us two, for he worked it out by himself." He shifted and spoke directly to Gawen. "A king needs such cunning. But he needs a good right hand as well. I shall be yours, my lord, though I envy you the sword."

"The sword is yours, Arthur, never mine. Though I can now thrust and slash, having learned that much under the ham-handedness of your good tutor, I shall not ride to war. I have learned to fear the blade's edge as well as respect it." Gawen smiled.

The king turned again to Merlinus. "Help me, mage. I do not understand."

Merlinus rose and put the crown back on Arthur's head. "But I think I do at last, though why I should be so slow to note it, I wonder. Age must dull the mind as well as the fingers. I have had an ague of the brain this fall. I said no man but you could pull the sword — and no man has." He held out his hand. "Come, child. You shall make a lovely May queen, I think. By then the hair should be long enough for Sir Kay's list, though what, I think, we shall ever do about the short utterances is beyond me."

"A *girl*? He's a girl?" Arthur looked baffled.

"Magic even beyond my making," said Merlinus. "But what is your name, child? Surely not Gawen."

"Guinevere," she said. "I came to learn to be a knight and to challenge Sir Gawain, who had dishonored my sister. But I find—

"That he is a bubble-head not worth the effort?" interrupted Arthur. "He shall marry your sister. And he shall be glad of it, for she is the sister of my queen."

Guinevere laughed. "She will like that, too. Her head is as empty as his. But she *is* my sister. And without a brother to champion her, I had to do."

Merlinus laughed. "And you did splendidly. But about that butter trick. . . ."

Guinevere put her hand over her breast. "I shall never tell as long as. . . ." She hesitated.

"Anything," Arthur said. "Ask for anything."

"As long as I can have my sword back."

Arthur looked longingly at the sword, hefted it once, and then put it solemnly in her hand.

"Oh, not *this* one," Guinevere said. "It is too heavy and unwieldy. It does not sit well in my hand. I mean the other, the one you pulled."

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"Oh, *that*," said Arthur. "With all my heart."

And if Merlinus thought there was more honest enthusiasm in the king's last statement than in any the whole night long, he was wise enough not to remark on it. And stranger though he was to loving, he knew enough to guess that its magic would also be felt from this day forth.

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...and here we thought little girls *were supposed to be made of sugar and spice. With "Magic Cookies," Thomas Wylde ("My Old Car," Jan. 1985) has indeed given us "food for thought."*

Magic Cookies

BY
THOMAS WYLDE

Hey, wait up, you guys!" Brandon whispered fiercely. Twenty yards ahead of him, Carl and Buzz rounded a corner, their sneakers smacking and squeaking on the concrete.

He was getting ditched again.

It's not fair, he thought.

Brandon rounded the corner and collapsed against the brick wall, wheezing to catch his breath. In the distance he heard the ringing of a chain link fence. He shivered. It was spring, and though the midnight air was not cold, as the sweat broke from his skin and soaked his shirt and steamed away into the dark, he felt chilled.

First Street was empty. He trotted on toward the rattling fence at the end of the alley. There he found Carl and Buzz standing on the other side, "waiting" for him.

"C'mon, Bran," said Buzz, grinning. "You wanted to come."

Brandon did a comic take at the height of the fence.

"I'll never make it over *that*."

Buzz looked at Carl. "Really?"

"Why not?" said Carl.

Brandon played the buffoon, grabbing his belly in both hands. "Cause I'm too fat."

Buzz said, "*Really?*"

Carl said, "Why didn't I notice that before?"

For a moment all three of them stared at one another through the fence. Then the scene was over, and Brandon turned away, his clown's face collapsed, his stomach sour. He heard them, running off, snuffling with that hysterical laughter that happens when it's imperative not to make a sound.

Brandon limped to the mouth of

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the alley. His new sneakers — the ones he'd pestered his mother a month for — hurt his feet. Now, at least, he wouldn't have to pretend they didn't.

The main drag was quiet. From where he stood, near the end of the business district, he could see all three stoplights blinking red in a halo of faint mist.

He felt in his windbreaker pocket for the last of the Snickers. He'd bought three of them from the vending machine at the closed gas station a block from his house — and had already given two of them to his "buddies" at the beginning of their short romp. He'd stood by while they ate theirs, pretending not to be hungry at the moment (though he was *always* hungry), because he didn't like to be seen eating. He just *knew* his unholy belly craving for food showed in his face when he ate.

Now he was alone — as he had cynically predicted when he sneaked out of the house — and there was no reason not to eat the damned thing. For a moment he thought some miracle might have occurred and the candy bar would taste rotten, that he had somehow learned his lesson, grown up, snapped out of it, come to gain control over the central craziness of his life.

But of course the Snickers tasted great and it was all gone before he could hardly get used to its dark, sweet taste. He carefully licked the wrapper, rolled it up, and put it in his pocket. No clues, please.

O.K., here I am. Ten past midnight and everybody with any sense is in bed. What's to do?

Oh, yeah. . . .

The bakery riddle!

Every morning Zweng's Bakery simply *reeked* of fresh pastry and bread, and they *never* sold day-old stuff. Was that because they never had any left over? Or was it possible — oh, my God — they just . . . *dumped* it?

The idea was both infuriating and tantalizing. His mouth began to water. Getting ditched always made him hungry.

Brandon was so wound up he forgot to limp.

Zweng's Bakery was only three blocks from home, squeezed in between a Kentucky Fried Chicken and a pizza joint. A Sears catalog store completed the little shopping center.

The alley was dark, and he wished he had a flashlight. He stepped silently to the cold metal lip of the trash container and looked over the side. It was hopelessly black inside.

He sniffed the air, and it was sweet and dark and spicy. He hesitated. Was it worth going over the side?

As he stood, undecided, shivering in his damp clothes, he glanced at the back door of the bakery.

His heart almost stopped.

The door was a dead black chunk of space.

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He could see, could *feel*, the cold steel door swung open against the inside wall.

He stood in the doorway and strained to see, to hear.

Once, in the bakery after school, he'd joked with old Mrs. Zweng about how nice it would be to own a bakery. She said, "So, you want to get up every morning 3:30 and commence the baking?"

Three-thirty, she'd said. It was only a little past twelve. She must have left it open by mistake.

His mind filled with the image of a shop half full of day-old pastries. Forget the damned dumpster.

He stood in the doorway, sniffing.

There was something. . .

He stumbled forward across the threshold. His eyes adjusted slowly, and he suddenly got the feeling there were people standing just inches away, waiting for him to get used to the dark.

Of course they could see ***him*** standing in the doorway.

He felt instantly vulnerable, like coming into a dark movie house out of the bright sunshine. The movie is playing, but the scene is lit for night, black as coiled licorice. You stumble down the aisle, peering hopelessly into theoretical rows, absolutely blind to the occupancy of the seats — and you know they can see you plainly, that they marvel at your stumbling, that they giggle at your apologetic groping amongst them.

He dared not move. Something *was* looming in the hallway, fabricating itself out of the darkness in excruciating silence. He looked to one side, trying to use the more sensitive part of his eye. *Some*thing was there.

The air was hot and spicy, alive with faraway murmurs.

What *is* that?

Then he knew. It was a mannequin, a dress-shop dummy. He whispered, "Jesus H. Christ," and the mannequin whipped out in sudden fury and grabbed his wrist.

He started to scream, but a warm, dry hand smacked across his mouth and pressed it shut. The mannequin swung him around, the door slammed shut, the lights came on.

It was no mannequin.

"Mrs. Zweng!" he gasped.

Wait a minute!

It was Mrs. Zweng, all right, but not the soft old lady he'd seen a million times after school, bagging up a pair of cream puffs or a dozen sweet cookies for him. ***This*** Zweng was hard and mean, and his sense of relief puffed away on the heat of her eyes.

She's out of her mind!

She pressed him against the wall, hands still at his wrist and mouth. How could she have hands that strong?

Fifty years of kneading dough.

As this answering thought swarmed through his mind from without, a new film of sweat burst from his face.

The old woman smiled, and he re-

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coiled, banging his head against the concrete wall. She took her hand from his mouth and put it on his belly.

Fat boy, came the words in his mind. *You are very naughty tonight.* "What am I to do with you?" she asked. He hardly realized she had spoken.

He looked beyond her head into the back room of the bakery. His eyes widened.

One large white enameled table was half full of motionless brown babies, their delicate knees bent akimbo. Each had a tiny hand raised to its mouth. *My babies,* she said without speaking. *My beautiful babies.*

"You have big eyes," she murmured.

Now he could smell the ovens.

"What are you doing to those babies?"

She giggled. "I *eat* them!"

He swayed on his feet. She playfully lifted a baby and tore off a soft brown arm. She pushed tiny fingers into her mouth. Brandon began to slide along the wall toward the floor.

She grabbed his shirtfront and dragged him to a bench.

"Here," she said. "Smell the *blood.*" She pushed the stump of the arm into his face. It smelled like . . . bread.

Of course.

When he looked at the table again, it was obvious. The brown babies were grotesque loaves of bread.

But who in this town wanted such bread?

"It is a secret," she said, her old face pressed close.

She looked momentarily worried, and he immediately wondered if he might get something out of this. If he were to tell. . . .

"I suppose," she said, eyes closed, "you would like a reward for your silence."

He nodded, trying to be as cool as the gangsters on TV. But he was too scared, and when the old woman suddenly opened her eyes, he drew his breath audibly. *That* made her smile.

She looked him over slowly.

"You're a boy who loves to eat, yes?"

He nodded, stunned and confused.

"How would you like some . . . cookies?" she said, twisting her head to study his eyes. "Yes, yes, cookies are a boy's best friend."

He felt her strong hands rubbing his left hand, pushing and prying his fingers, squeezing them painfully.

"Cookies," she said, and her eyes rolled upward. "Lovely cookies. You like chocolate? Of course you do. And vanilla. Sweet and tasty, melt in your mouth, crumbs like soft butter, crème-filled with fudge, dark and biting. *Lieblich!* Cookies, yes? A handful of cookies to take with you. To *have* with you always. Yes, that would be nice. Cookies. . . ."

He could taste them as she spoke — chocolate, vanilla, a hint of banana, melting crunchily in his mouth, crushed between his teeth, pressed

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against his tongue. His mouth filled with saliva.

"You like that," she said. Oh, yes, she could tell.

When he opened his eyes, there were two cookies in his left hand — a black one between his thumb and forefinger, a yellow one nestled in his palm.

"Try one," she said softly. "I guarantee. . . ."

He bit hungrily into the chocolate cookie. It was exquisite, a dark explosion of sweetness in his mouth. He finished it at once, and as he did so, the yellow cookie seemed to jump up to take its place between his thumb and forefinger. He bit eagerly into it, and his head jerked with the pleasure of it. Before he could pop the last morsel into his mouth, he felt a tickling movement in the palm of his hand. Another chocolate cookie grew magically there, and as soon as he emptied his fingers of the vanilla-banana cookie, the new one jumped fully formed to his grip. He hesitated, mouth still watering, and felt the tingling growth of a new yellow cookie in his palm. He looked at the old woman and grinned.

"Like them?" she said. "Of course you do!"

He nodded, belatedly, and bit into the fresh chocolate cookie. In a few minutes he realized that he would never tire of the cookies. Whichever one was clamped between his finger and thumb, *that* was the one he wanted the very most. Going back and forth was a delight.

Old Lady Zweng guided him to his feet and pointed him out the back of the shop. She opened the door for him. "Remember," she said. "Tell no one of the baby bread — or of the cookies. These are special secrets, just for you and me, yes?"

He stumbled out into the dark alley, turned to give her his assurances. The door slammed in his face.

He couldn't believe his good luck. He'd gone looking for a pile of day-old pastry — and had come away with an endless supply of the finest cookies in the world.

Out of sight!

He stood for a moment in the alley, then was afraid the patrol car might pass by. He danced away home, gobbling cookies as he went.

The house was dark and quiet. He sneaked into his room and got undressed. Then he went into the kitchen and got a two-liter jug of Coke and a glass full of ice. For the next hour or so, back in his room with the door locked, he munched cookies and drank Coke and watched an old Jack Oakie flick on TV with the sound on real low. It was fun.

He made it to bed about 3:30.

At eight his mother woke him, banging on his door. He lied, yelling that he was sick and couldn't go to school. She wanted to see that for

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herself, so he jumped out of bed, unlocked the door, and dived for the covers again, hiding his left hand.

His mother leaned close. "You look like hell."

"That's what I said." He hastened to add, "But I'll probably be all right for tomorrow."

Tomorrow was Friday.

She frowned, and her limp hair fell across her face. He guessed she'd be wearing one of her wigs to work today.

When she had gone he chewed sleepily at the crumbling cookies in his hand, then dozed off for another two hours. When he got up he turned on the TV and crawled back into bed to watch a game show. Then he watched cartoons, followed by back-to-back episodes of "Adam-12."

At two he got out of bed and onto the bathroom scale — and discovered that despite all the cookies he'd eaten, he hadn't gained any weight. His stomach gurgled happily.

He stared at his face in the mirror.

He looked like the Pillsbury Doughboy on drugs.

He went to brush the hair out of his face and raked his forehead with cookie crumbs. Damn it!

Cooking breakfast proved equally messy. He kept grabbing for things with the wrong hand. He left a trail of crumbs everywhere he went.

It was more than an inconvenience. It was becoming the most important thing in his life.

He began to wonder — finally — how the hell he was going to get through the next sixty years of his life.

He thought: I'll have to keep my hand in a bag.

"This is not working out," he muttered.

He sniffed at the cookies. Devil's food, right?

But as he tentatively nibbled the chocolate cookie, he was at once appalled and perversely delighted to find that it was *still* the most delicious cookie he'd ever tasted.

The hell with it.

He wolfed down his sausage and eggs, then marched back to his bedroom with another jug of Coke.

He spent an hour sitting before the television set, downing the excellent cookies.

There would be plenty of time later to worry about his future.

"I can always have 'em surgically removed," he said suddenly.

He laughed, but the sound seemed to die in the empty house.

At 3:30, as he wandered about the house, he saw the first of the high school kids coming home. He watched them pass in the street out front, singly and in groups, talking happily or moping along. He heard shouts and taunts, and saw Carl and Buzz stalk by. They ignored his house. He felt, as usual, left out.

He was leaving the window when he saw her.

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Tawny Cartmell, a girl in one of his classes, was coming up his driveway.

Oh, no!

He ran for his bedroom and grabbed his robe, crazily jamming his fists through tangled arms. The doorbell rang. *Oh, my God!* He crashed through his bedroom door, struggling with the tie-sash like some inept strangler. The handful of cookies kept getting in his way. *Christ!* He skidded into the hallway, almost ran headlong into the front door, grabbed the doorframe to hold himself up. The doorbell rang again.

What the hell does she *want?*

In the three years he'd seen her around school, he'd never said a single word to her. She was beautiful, and he was . . . well, he was Brandon, the fat boy.

He took hold of the doorknob, then hastily jammed his left hand into his robe pocket. He opened the door.

"Brandon?" she asked. She smiled.

He blinked at her, grinning like a buffoon.

She carried her books against her breasts, and he stared openly as she fumbled with them to retrieve a slip of paper. "Mrs. Bates wanted me to give you next week's assignment." She looked up, handing him the sheet. "Just in case."

He was still blinking, but he managed to take hold of the paper and grip it hard to keep from dropping it.

"You know," she said. "Finals are coming up and everything."

"Thank you," he said, trying to think of something intelligent to say.

"But you're coming back before then, of course."

"Oh, yes," he said, trying to think of *any*thing to say.

She was about to go, her duty completed. He held out his hand. "Want a cookie?"

She stared at him as if he were out of his mind, and it suddenly dawned on him that the cookies might not be real.

That's the trick!

They're imaginary cookies!

But no.

"Looks tempting," she finally said. She peered at it doubtfully. He realized she must have seen him yank his hand out of the robe. Maybe she was inspecting the cookie for lint. "But I'm on a diet," she said, and she smiled —but not very much.

He thought: Disgusting, aren't I?

"They're *very* good," he said. "Try one."

For one intense moment of lunatic hope, his mind wrapped around the notion that the cookies — obviously magical in origin — might also turn out to be aphrodisiac.

She studied the chocolate cookie. He held it close to her nose, as if to entice her. He began to feel as though he were starring in a cartoon, but it was too late now. If he jerked the cookie back, it might look even weirder. He held it close to her and waited to hear

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her refusal. Then she could go home and he could shut the door and collapse on the floor.

But she said, "Are they really good?"

"Cookies of the Gods," he said. "I swear."

She grinned and plucked the cookie from his fingers. He quickly pulled his hand away, so she wouldn't see how the next cookie popped up in place.

He smiled at her, too nervous to speak.

She put the cookie to her lips and looked into his eyes until he broke the contact — about a fifth of a second.

He imagined himself the serpent handing Eve the deadly fruit. O.K., baby, this is going to open your eyes.

And it did.

The moment after she put the cookie into her mouth, she yanked it out, gagging. She spat crumbs at him, her face twisting.

"You creep!" she yelled, throwing the cookie at his head. "That's horrible!"

She almost dropped her books, but she got control, slapped at his hand when he tried to help, and ran off the porch and down the driveway. He was stunned.

Halfway down the driveway she turned quickly and yelled, "God, Brandon, you are *such* a creep!" And she was gone, trotting up the street.

He had to pick up the cookie to close the door. He sniffed it, tasted it tentatively, then ate it. Waste not, want not. The cookie tasted fine to him.

("You are such a *creep!*")

He went back to his bedroom and dropped down in front of the TV. Creep. Creep. Creep. The word bounced around in his head. I hate her.

No . . . I hate myself.

In half an hour he had gone through another couple of dozen cookies. Each one tasted as good as the last — but now there was a certain novelty to his activity.

"Creep," said the cookie, as he crunched through it. "Creep. Creep. Creep."

At 8:30 his mother called from some noisy bar and said she'd be eating out that night. Brandon said, "Fine," and hung up. He was already in the middle of *his* dinner.

Creep, creep, creep.

When she got home at midnight, she went straight to her bedroom and slammed the door. He was lying awake in the dark. His stomach felt funny, but every time he touched one of the cookies to his lips, he couldn't help but jam it into his mouth. Creep, creep, creep.

In half an hour, when the noises stopped coming through the wall from his mother's bedroom, Brandon got groggily to his feet. There was one way out of this. He'd have go back to the bakery and beg Old Lady Zweng to take the cookies away.

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He immediately suffered a pang of regret, and the wondrous taste of the cookies haunted his mouth. Idiot!

He forced himself out of the house, walking shakily. What if the old woman ripped him to pieces? It would be nice to have some backup, but he had no friends. None at all.

Carl's house was dark. Brandon stared at it, thinking about the last time he'd come to play. It must have been five years at least. It was about then that he had seemed to drop out of neighborhood activities.

He thought: This is stupid. Nobody is going to help me.

He remembered which window was Carl's, though, and he stood beneath it, looking up. He couldn't find any pebbles, so he tossed a cookie at the glass. A moment later a face appeared and the window opened wider.

"What do you want?" said Carl.

"You wanna hang out?" said Brandon. "I got an idea."

Carl was astonished. "What?"

"I wanna check out Zweng's Bakery. They might—"

"Forget it," said Carl. "They're out of business. The old lady killed herself last night." He cocked his head. "Everybody was talking about it today."

"I wasn't at school," Brandon muttered, his mind an echoing cave of impossibilities. Dead? Closed? Out of business? Gone forever?

"Take off, creep!" Carl said abruptly. The window slid down, the curtains swung together.

Brandon stepped back into the hedge. He closed his fist on the cookies and threw a handful of crumbs into the air.

The alley behind the bakery was deserted. He'd already walked briskly past the big front windows on the street side. There had been a small sign announcing the end of the business, and all the racks and counters were bare. The alley echoed to the crackle of his street shoes on the sandy asphalt. The steel door was shut tight.

She's gone, he thought. She's really gone.

He peeked over the lip of the dumpster, then snapped on the little flashlight he'd brought, just in case.

The dumpster was half full of junk, empty bags of flour and sugar, ripped boxes of dark chocolate, and so forth. Beneath the paper and the cloth lurked lumps of tan and yellow stuff.

He couldn't reach the surface of the trash, and the alley disclosed not a single stick with which to probe the contents of the dumpster. He hesitated a moment, then — because the dumpster was the only link left to the old woman — he climbed grunting over the side and dropped into the container. The trash made a soft sighing sound as he sank into it.

As he began to dig through the stuff, the beam of his tiny flashlight dimmed and flickered and threatened to go out altogether.

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"Come on, come on!" he whispered desperately. "Just give me five minutes."

There was a pile of pastry beneath the paper, sugary lumps of dough that sparkled in his dim light. Some of it was wet, unbaked, rotting. His stomach turned at the sight, but he dug deeper.

He had to hold the failing light in his right hand which left only his cookie-filled fist to do the digging. Progress was slow. He was clubbing the ant-infested rolls aside with his arm when he saw the naked foot. He recoiled, banging his head against the side of the dumpster.

He was stunned, and nearly fell dizzily into the trash. He swayed a moment, breathing hard the sweet stench of the container.

When he looked again — he *had* to look again — the foot became a crescent roll.

He held his soggy cookies tightly in his clenched fist.

What am I looking for? Old Lady Zweng?

His legs, buried in trash to his knees, jerked away from the image of her hand reaching out.

The flashlight went dead.

He smacked it insanely against his thigh — and the beam flashed, orange and dim. He screamed. His leg was crawling with large black ants. The light went out and stayed out.

He hopped madly in the trash, flinging the dead flashlight and using his right hand to slap at his legs. He lost his footing and fell, glancing off the slippery steel walls, his burdened left hand grabbing ineffectively. He landed face down in the trash and squirmed to roll himself over.

He could *feel* the contents of the dumpster roll under his body, poking, probing, grabbing at him. A large flabby bag of flour wrapped itself around his legs. Soggy sweet rolls shaped like mangled babies seemed to march across his face. He gagged and screamed.

My hands are strong, said a voice in his mind.

He thrashed about, banging the sides of the container. For a second it seemed he was worming his way deeper and deeper into the can, and he expected any instant to come face to face with the old lady. He could almost feel her lips pressed to his — soft, dusty, sickly sweet, her tongue swollen, pale as a maggot—

He clenched his teeth and rolled forcefully face down in the garbage. It was the only way he could get the leverage.

He came quickly up to his knees, flinging his arms all about in a rage. Then he stood, jumping back till the wall of the dumpster pressed his back. He whirled, grabbed the edge, and pulled with all his strength, kicking his legs as he went.

Whatever had bound his legs broke loose at last, and he pitched over the edge and into the alley, landing hard on his back on the dirty asphalt.

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The alley suddenly brightened.

A car was coming around the corner at the far end, a red light gleaming in its roof. The patrol.

He suddenly thought: Who in this town wants bread shaped like babies?

Brandon jumped to his feet and ran as hard as he could all the way home.

In his dark room he lay in bed, gnawing cookies unhappily. Their taste was fading, turning rank, and more than once he had to reach for the table lamp, worried there were large black ants crawling all over them.

So he ate slowly in the dark, as if he meant to come at last to the end of them, to exhaust the capabilities of the magic. He half hoped that if the old woman was really gone, the spell would fade.

Early in the morning he turned on the lamp and held his hand under the beam. Very deliberately he voided his fist in one rapid motion. For that brief instant his hand was empty, though a raw red patch blemished his palm.

Quickly, though, the patch began to bulge and take on texture. In a few seconds the cookie was formed, and it darted to the place between his thumb and forefinger. The next cookie was already taking shape.

Five or six times he dumped the cookies and watched as they formed themselves again without hesitation.

He turned off the light and lay back on his bed.

As if to mock him, his next experimental taste of cookie was delicious — every bit as good as his first taste.

He groaned as he chewed, his mouth compulsively watering. He thought: This is not working out.

He pulled the half-eaten cookie from his mouth and swallowed painfully. His throat was raw.

What am I doing to myself?

The last thing in this world he needed was an endless supply of cookies. Sixteen years old, and he was already eighty pounds overweight. At that rate he'd never see forty.

I don't want to die!

His left fist closed tight, and he felt the cookies shatter.

Damn Old Lady Zweng! What he really *needed* was a magic weight-reduction pill, something that would slim him down at once.

He tried to imagine what he would be like. Wearing regular-sized clothes, striding down the sidewalk, winking at the girls with their cute, astonished faces.

Hey, baby! Yeah, it's me! What do you think?

"Sure, pal," he whispered. "Dream on!"

He wanted to scream, and the rage grew.

Get away from me!

He threw the half-eaten cookie away. Then he threw the two new ones in his left hand against the wall. There was an explosion of crumbs in the dark.

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That felt good. Action! That's right, had to *do* something. He had to *act* to get himself free.

He had the power!

He spent a long time in the dark throwing the cookies into a corner of his room as fast as they formed in his hand. He liked to hear them hit the wall, enjoyed the soft, fluttering thud as they disintegrated. Sometimes he threw them hard, other times he tossed them limply, mechanically, with vague regret. (They were such *good* cookies. . . .)

It was exhausting, dizzying work, but he kept at it.

There had to be an end to this. There *had* to be.

The whole rest of his life was at stake.

At dawn he zonked out, his head clogged with dreams of toil and fright. He awoke and savagely threw the crumbling cookies in his fist at the dim pile in the corner.

The sudden motion made him dizzy, and he had to close his eyes.

What's happening to me?

He dreamed he was lying in the bottom of the dumpster. Old Lady Zweng had climbed onto his body and was banging his head with her hard fists. He could hear the blows crashing on his fragile skull.

He woke up to a pounding on his door.

"Hey, sport!" his mother yelled in. "You said you'd be going in today."

"All right," he said, and the effort nearly made him faint. He lolled in his bed, fists clenching weakly.

Instantly he opened his eyes and looked at his left hand. It was empty.

He stared blearily at it in the morning light. His hand was dark, ruddy, blistered — but empty.

He kept staring, five, ten, fifteen seconds — no new cookie grew there. He fell back in bed, exhausted, too tired even to rejoice. They may come back. . . .

His mother was back at the door, banging. "Come on!"

He groaned. Now he really was sick. "O.K.!" he wanted to scream, but the word lay dead in his thick throat.

His heart missed a beat, then doubled up on the next. He was dizzy again, and knew he'd never be able to stand up.

He put his right hand on his bony chest and felt the way his heart jumped and shuddered. It reminded him of his mother's car when it kept running raggedly after the ignition was off.

I'm dead, but my heart doesn't know it yet.

His hand slid down over his belly.

Something was terribly wrong. His once plump belly was slack and fallen, the skin loose and floppy.

He tried to raise his head, caught a glimpse of his sunken, emaciated body, then fell back nauseated. His heart kept skipping beats.

I've been emptied out!

His mother was banging, banging on the door. "Brandon!"

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He squandered the last of his strength rolling toward the edge of his bed. He looked into the corner where he'd thrown the magic cookies, but they were no longer there. In their place was a large, wet pile of gelatinous fat. There had to be fifty pounds of the yellow, runny stuff, maybe a hundred.

His head dropped, his strength gone.

The room was silent, the door pounding over.

Maybe she's going to get a neighbor to kick it in.

The cookies, those magical cookies, had to come from *some*place. Now he knew where.

Manufactured from my own fat.

It made perfect sense.

His heart shuddered again, and he wondered if his mother would come back in time.

Won't she be surprised. She always thought I'd die fat.

Not me. Not me.

The ceiling blurred, and he closed his eyes.

His banging heart shook the bed. It was as if all his strength had been concentrated there.

My heart wants to escape. So long.

His mind drifted.

Later he saw faces peering down, and after that a siren whined, coming closer.

Ya better hurry. . . .

His mind jumped ahead.

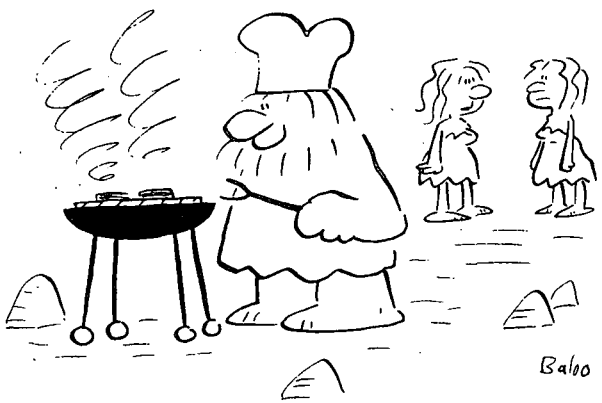
There he was, imperially slim, walking fast along First Street. A smile played at his lips. What do you think?

In the ambulance he reached out dreamily and rubbed his left hand on the plastic wall.

"Don't do that," said a voice.

"It itches," he whispered.

Then the hand fell back upon the sheet, palm up, empty.



"The fire was okay, but then he invented that *thing!"*

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Joe Hensley makes a welcome return to these pages with a first rate tale about the investigation of a death at a state mental hospital and a remarkable patient who holds the answer to this and other, Larger, questions...

Savant

BY

JOE L. HENSLEY

Dr. Morgan sat with his back to the office window and listened.

"The sheriff's out here again today," Mrs. Lord, the hospital administrator, said severely.

"I saw him around my building."

"They did the autopsy. He's seen the preliminary findings and he's not satisfied with them." Mrs. Lord looked out her window imperiously. "I'm not, either. A child just doesn't die without reason, even a child as profoundly retarded as Sandra."

"I'm puzzled about it also, but I'm afraid I can't add anything," Morgan said. He looked at his watch. It was time to be back on the ward that was the focal point of his life these days.

She looked critically down at a file that he presumed to be his and then over his head and out her window, surveying her domain. He knew she liked everything tidy, and he had no objection to it being that way as long as her orderliness didn't interfere in his life.

"Outside" was a state mental hospital, a gathering of ramshackle buildings, recreation areas, and farmland. Once it had been all retarded children, but a falling state budget had combined the children with adults. Tax money for the retarded and the mentally ill existed at the far edges of a politician's dream.

"Your appointment as a permanent staff member comes up next month. What am I supposed to tell the board then?"

He shook his head cynically, not knowing, not particularly caring. A fourteen-year-old girl with a life history of profound mental retardation following postnatal cerebral infection had died. Most like that in his ward were forgotten, abandoned by their

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parents, unvisited and unwanted. But Sandra was one of the rare ones whose family still visited frequently, a family living close by the hospital. They'd gone to the prosecutor and sheriff. Investigators now prowled the halls of his wards, where the most profoundly retarded were, asking the attendants questions, making notes. The newspapers had gotten into the death recently. Their stories had been vague, but suspicious.

"Nothing else unusual on your ward?" she asked carefully. Her degrees were in business, not medicine, and he and Mrs. Lord shared no common purpose. She was an administrator, he was a doctor.

"There's never anything usual on it. Children change. Even children who are profoundly retarded learn small, new things, develop new symptoms." He almost reminded her about Kelly, but decided not to. Kelly was the one person on the ward whom investigators could talk to if Kelly wanted to talk. But Kelly was delicate and had her own problems. She was blind, retaining only the ability to tell light from shadow, and her days and strength were spent in eagerly sculpting the heads she remembered from when she'd had sight, or new ones she felt with her inquiring fingers.

A savant. Idiot savant. The sculpted heads were beautifully done, and Morgan had written to Kelly's family about them more than a year back — with no reply and now none expected. Kelly was twenty-six years old. Until a few years back, she'd been able to see, but had not interacted well with her peers or the staff, nor had the gift. Morgan had read the reports. Loss of vision from glaucoma had sent her on a strange inward journey. When Morgan had come to the hospital, Kelly had not communicated. Now she talked, but only when she wanted to talk. The heads were her obsession.

Mrs. Lord went on for more minutes. Morgan, listening to her, found that he cared nothing about whether or not he was reappointed. There were other hospitals, and hospitals like this were so understaffed with doctors trained also as psychiatrists that even scandal wasn't likely to keep from him from finding a new job. He was used to scandal. He knew he had drinking and drug problems. Mrs. Lord knew it also and had known it when he was hired. He thought she was examining him covertly today to see what shape he was in.

Not too bad, lady. I'm trying to cut back. Maybe one day I'll quit.

He escaped to the wards. Once there he took a strong pill to catch up. For a while he read the paper, but the news was, as usual, bad. Someone had assassinated another leader in India. Terrorists had commandeered a jetliner in Italy. The Soviets claimed they had new weapons, and new defenses against old weapons. The national debt was growing alarmingly.

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Somehow the whole system had gone wrong and was so ponderous that no one could now change it. He put the paper into the wastebasket. The hate that still smoldered within him was reserved mostly for the system and those who kept it painfully going, fighting about money for weapons and money for hunger, wasting two units for every unit spent usefully, internationally preying savagely on each other. One day soon they'd have to use all those weapons, if only for the sake of economy, and blow the planet up.

The thought was not unsatisfying.

His wards were painted in calm colors. Children and adults lay in ugly wooden orthopedic carts, many of them home-crafted in the shops of the state hospital. The patients stared up at the ceiling, most of them seeing nothing, nonverbal and nonambulatory. Sandra had been like that. And then, without symptom or warning, she'd died.

He read the charts and visited the two wards he had primary responsibility for. He prescribed Dilantin, phenobarbital, Mellaril, Thorazine, and Valium for spasticity and seizures. He prescribed for constipation, incipient bedsores, and aggressive behavior. When he was exhausted and done, he prescribed some illegal Dilaudid for himself.

With that accomplished, he escaped to Kelly.

Kelly lay in her own cart. She was a thin, small woman with already graying hair. Her face was remote and unpretty. Morgan thought she was aware of what went on around her, that she heard everything. How much she understood of what she heard was questionable. He'd tried to give her the various intelligence tests available, but she'd been uninterested. He assessed her as brilliant in the area of her savantpower, dull to normal in all others.

Today Kelly was talkative.

"Man came in. Asked about girl who died. Wanted to know what I knew." She shook her head, upset somehow by the questioning.

Morgan waited. When Kelly stopped, Morgan prompted her, "What do you know, Kelly? What did you tell the man?"

"Made her head once. Her mother came and saw what I do. Brought Sandra close, and I touched and then made a face out of the clay." She looked up at the bright window that lay above her. "Can see her like she was. She was sick."

"How sick?" Morgan asked, interested.

Kelly answered as she usually did when her interest waned. "I don't know. You want me to make your head now?"

"Sometime. Soon now." He liked this child-woman, but the thought of her fingers on his face was repugnant to him. He no longer wanted to be close to any person.

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At times he daydreamed that he was terminally ill and heavily armed, ready to take his own revenge on an uncaring world. It was something that could take his mind away from worse memories.

"I make heads, and Nurse Datal bakes so they last," Kelly said, happy about it.

"I know," Morgan said. "Why do you make the heads, Kelly?" He was feeling pretty good now, floating a little, all pain and remembrance dim. The wife and daughter who'd vanished in the flames no longer insistently called to him. He could forget them.

"See them inside my head." Kelly nodded, still happy. "Have to make them. Once I could see many things, but now what I see is inside my head."

Conversation waned. Morgan liked Kelly and sensed Kelly also liked him. It was enough to sit close to the cart, to be there, to make Kelly a tiny part of the thing he'd lost, an ersatz substitute.

For a time Morgan slept in the chair by Kelly's cart. He was awakened by a hand on his shoulder.

"I need to talk with you again, Dr. Morgan," Sheriff Boonburger ordered heavily. "So wake up."

Morgan nodded and got up. He led the sheriff to his office. He found in the walk there, that he was trembly, and his watch told him it was past time for something, maybe some Demerol. His taste in drugs had become more catholic down the years.

Morgan took a chair, and the sheriff towered above him — squeaking leather belt, boots, and gun — making Morgan nervous, making him want to reach out and grab the gun and fire it until it was empty.

"I'm wondering if you got any new ideas on why the girl died?"

Morgan shook his head.

"You have charge of the ward. You give the pills out, prescribe for the patients here. The results of the drug tests on Sandra haven't come back yet, but the thought now is that she may have died from an overdose of something. What were you giving her?"

Morgan tried to remember. Except for Kelly, somehow the ward residents all seemed to fall into one mass of gasping, cruel mouths, sick and angry screams, dumb silence, and violent seizures. He reached for Sandra's chart. "She got Valium for spasticity and phenobarbital for seizures. She got some suppositories to ease elimination." He smiled without humor. "At the time she died, her worst medical situation appeared to be that she had hemorrhoids."

"How often did she have seizures?"

Morgan shrugged. "Sometimes she'd get two in one day. Sometimes, when we had her well controlled, she'd not get one for a month or two. She'd been in good shape for a month."

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"Did she have some kind of seizure when she died?"

"You know she didn't, Sheriff."

The sheriff looked at him. "You don't volunteer a lot of information, do you, Doctor?"

"What do you want the information for?"

"To find out what happened."

"People have died here before. I'm sure you know that. These people lie for years in orthopedic carts, they're fed diet foods, they get no exercise except what the physical therapists give them. Most of them can't even tell us when something goes wrong. They tend to have strokes, heart problems. They seem to develop cancer more easily and more often than normal people." Morgan shook his head. "You weren't interested in the other deaths we've had here. Why the interest in this one?"

"Their fathers weren't on my county council," the sheriff said. "He don't like what happened, and therefore I don't like it, either. And when I checked on you, I didn't like what I got told, Doctor."

Morgan waited, feeling a chill run through him.

"One place we called said you were a practicing lush and a doper, that you'd had some accident tragedy in your family and it turned you into something with a bad smell to it. Some other places you've been were very evasive. I'm now wondering, if we don't find a cause for Sandra's death, if her old man would let us all off the hook and give up his crusade if you just packed on out of here — resigned?"

"Is that what you want?" Morgan asked. "Would that satisfy you and your local politicians?"

"Maybe, but not until all the results are in from the lab tests. Then we'll see what will satisfy my people."

Morgan found he was having trouble concentrating. He felt hot inside and he hurt all over. He needed something soon — codeine, Percodan, Darvon, Demerol. Something.

The sheriff moved to the door. "You wait," he warned. "Don't try to leave."

When the sound of footsteps had receded completely away, Morgan took another pill. He got a bottle out of the bottom drawer of his desk and had a long pull of vodka to wash the narcotic down.

Waking was the hardest thing. In sleep there was refuge because there were seldom dreams. But when he awoke, all the dreams that had gathered on the horizon and been unable to get through the wall of drugs and alcohol he had erected awaited him again. Awakening in the office was always to the odors of the hospital. The stench was a mixture of rot, urine, and coffee this morning.

He lay on the couch in his office. He remembered the accident, being

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thrown clear. He'd tried to walk, then finally to crawl to the burning car, but he'd been unable. All he could do was listen to the screams that came from the flames. Wife and six-year-old daughter. Beautiful daughter. Not like Kelly. Not ugly and blind.

The other driver had been drunk, had been driving his old uninsured clunker at high speed on the wrong side of the road with a suspended license. Nothing much had happened to him. A slap on the wrist. Six months, suspended.

Morgan had been sober and drug-free. But not afterward.

Others said it would only take time and he'd forget, but he'd not forgotten, and now it was five years.

Physician, heal thyself. He'd tried, but found no cure. And now he was as he was, competent enough when he wasn't too hung out on drugs or alcohol, but unable to hold a job for very long because of his almost visible habits. A year or two one place, six months at another. A hobo doctor, embittered, puzzling to his peers, and perpetually angry.

He got up and found black coffee. He examined his face in the mirror of his office. He noted without interest that he was thinner than he'd been, and wondered when he'd last eaten a real meal. He saw that his eyes seemed almost transparent. He took a pill. A pill or a drink was his cure for everything. He could rail at himself because it was that way, but he no longer could change it. He'd even turned himself in once, been on an addiction ward for sixty days, then gone immediately back to the drugs when released. After a binge.

He was, he decided, like the world around him, gravely ill, terminal. No hope.

He went out into the wards and managed the morning routine. Nothing untoward seemed to have happened. Those who wet the bed had wet the bed. Those who could feed themselves were now doing it with varying success. Attendants fed the others. Many of the patients were on special diets. The attendants he passed eyed him curiously, and he wondered what the stories about him now were. His interest in them was minor, but curiosity remained.

He knew that once, a long time back, five years now, he'd been a good doctor. He knew that now he no longer was. He hadn't read anything in those five years, and his interest in psychiatry and medicine continued only because it gave him access to the drugs he needed to survive a while longer. His only fascination was in his own bitterness and feeding it, in dreaming of the world's damnation.

At two the sheriff came. He motioned Morgan to his office. Morgan followed the bigger man. Sheriff Boonburger took his chair, so Morgan sat meekly in the other one.

"They've called a grand jury, Doc."

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The sheriff watched him curiously, perhaps seeking some reaction. Morgan felt pretty good, about right. He smiled and nodded.

"I think probably they'll indict you for involuntary manslaughter real quick," the sheriff said, relishing his bombshell, still watching.

"Why would they do that?"

"Maybe because this year's election year. The girl died. She was in your care. You got drug problems. So you'll get indicted. Sometime tonight or tomorrow. I'll come out for you then. They're going to ask for a big bond. That means you'll be boarding with me." He watched Morgan with snow-cold eyes. "When I put you in, I'm going to strip-search you. You won't have any pills to help you, no bottle of booze to hide behind. I figure you'll break wide open in maybe two or three days. You'll tell me anything I want to hear just because I want to hear it."

"But you know I wasn't even close to that girl when she died, and you have no evidence that I either failed to do something for her or did something to her that caused her death?"

"She's dead, Doc. She was your patient. I can smell your breath from here. I can read your eyes. I've seen guys like you a hundred times. I'm not fooled. You'll break for me."

"I see," Morgan said, not seeing, but realizing the finality of it.

He planned. He figured out what was available and what it would require. Enough of these and he'd go to sleep and not wake up, enough of those and he'd float off and drown in his own juices.

No one to say good-bye to. Maybe Kelly. He chose the drowners.

He took a massive dose and wandered out into the ward. By the time he got to Kelly, it was hard to see, hard to navigate. Death was a soon-to-be thing.

He took Kelly's hand and woke her up from sleep.

"I came to say good-bye," he said. He noticed clinically that his voice wasn't slurred yet, but that the rest of him felt that way.

"Where do you go?" The sightless eyes sought him without success. "Why do you go?"

"It's time for me to go. I need to be with my family."

"Bring you head close. Let me touch your face. I want to sculpt you before you leave. I am sorry you leave." Tears came in her eyes. She shook her head. "I need you here. It's so lonely."

It seemed a small favor with death coming on. Morgan lowered his head and felt the small, inquiring fingers touch here and there, delicate as flowers, soft and smelling faintly of clay and urine. Something more than that came. There was a feeling of small, unexpected pain. There was momentary sickness and a small wrenching as if part of his head had

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been parted from the rest. He did not, in that moment, forget wife and daughter, but in a way, from that time on, he no longer remembered them in the same way.

It was the drug. He knew it was the drug.

When he found himself again, he felt rested and relaxed. He saw that Kelly was using the clay by the bed, the ever-present clay, clever hands already busily working. The head began to take shape.

Morgan was tired. He decided there was no time left to watch.

Morgan went back to his office. The deep pit he'd sought came, and he fell into it.

But it ended.

He came awake when he heard attendants moving about in the ward. he came up from sleep refreshed. He went for coffee and ate a roll. He went back to his office and got out a pill. He didn't feel he needed it, but the old habits were strong. The sheriff would be along sometime, and he wanted to be fortified for that. If death wasn't to be, then the last of life here would be pleasant. He wondered why death had not come. He was puzzled by it, but had no regret. He'd tried. Maybe he'd built up too much tolerance, and no drug could kill him? It seemed possible, if improbable.

The pill tasted bitter. Bile rose within him, and he found he must spit it out, not swallow it.

Outside, through the window, he saw a sheriff's car arrive.

He went to Kelly's cart. She lay there serene and unseeing, but knowing he was there. Waiting.

"You did something," he said to her in a low voice.

She looked at him with sightless eyes. She smiled slightly. "At first I only made the heads. Now I can do things inside some of them. I don't know how. I only know that when I touch someone, I can do this. I tried with Sandra a week before she died, when her mother came here. There was something bright deep there, but the walls were too high when I tried to reach in. Then it got all black inside. I could see she was going to die. I touched other things, but the blackness stayed." Tears came in her eyes. "It made me feel bad that she died, but I didn't know what to do about it."

"You didn't want her to die," he said soothingly.

She nodded. "No. I wanted her to live. I'm learning. Every day I try to learn. With these in here, there's nothing more to learn. They are dark inside and empty, like Sandra." She nodded up at him. "Once before, I reached up inside and touched blackness like Sandra's. I did it on purpose. He died also."

"Oh? Who was that?"

"Dr. Street. He touched me, he touched others, where he shouldn't have touched us. He was sick inside,

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all light and dark mixed, so I touched him as he was touching me. I touched until it turned dark red. When I see inside a head like that, I have to do something." She smiled, not sorry. "Sometimes I can change them. I changed you. I saw you were sick and unhappy, and I changed you." Her voice held a note of triumph.

He remembered Dr. Street. The man had owned a reputation for sexual bizarreness. He'd died suddenly a year back, been found dead in his room. The autopsy had said aneurysm.

"What exactly do you do inside a head?" he asked, chilled at the idea of it, but not that upset that people had died. Death was a part of life, of his life. That she could cause it intrigued more than frightened him.

She looked up at him with blind eyes. "It's like the other thing I do, the thing of making heads. I don't know. I only know what to do when I get there. I don't know how or why. And I also know I must do it. Even after Sandra and Dr. Street. Something inside my own head says I must do it."

"Yes," Morgan said. "Yes, I believe that." He leaned close. The sheriff had entered the ward. "Would you like for me to come back for you, to take you away from here, to take you places where you can sculpt many heads, heads full of light, perhaps even a few full of light and dark, like Dr. Street?"

"Yes. Oh, yes." She smiled at the sun-filled window. It was the first time he'd seen her truly excited.

"Wait, then. Tell no one else what you've told me. Wait for me."

Morgan spent long days in jail. Inside he ate as he'd not eaten in five years. He painted doors and walls for the sheriff. He talked learnedly when asked questions by the sheriff and deputies, trying to make them like him, trying to be of use.

One night, when a drunk went berserk, he helped quell him. He was pleasant and cooperative. He knew nothing about Sandra's death. The lab reports showed nothing new. Sandra was just dead.

Morgan said nothing about Kelly.

Newspaper reporters came and talked with him. He was pleasant to them, repeating the same story to them that he'd told the sheriff. He could see the sheriff watching him, then smiling at him. Attitudes shifted. The sheriff came past his cell and talked to him about signing a paper promising not to sue anyone. Morgan readily agreed.

He spent the time planning and thinking. He knew almost nothing about idiots savants, but knew he would read and find out more soon. He only knew, from books he'd read long before, that they existed; that there were those who could listen to music and play it back; others who could tell you what day of the week

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any date, past or present, occurred; others who could remember or add or multiply numbers. A gift to replace what retardation had taken?

Perhaps Kelly had the final gift, the gift perhaps for the times. He found that exciting, a new and better thing to daydream on. He no longer wanted revenge. Perhaps that had gone at the same time the drug addiction vanished. Now he wanted change. And he would be to her whatever she needed or wanted — father, mother, brother, or even husband — he would plan for and about her, care for her.

He found himself unexpectedly smiling at himself in mirrors. He'd found a new thing to believe in. Maybe this time he'd perform better. Maybe this time he'd not let it scream and burn and die.

Eighteen days later he was released, the indictment having been dismissed by a judge who'd read the transcript of grand jury testimony and listened to a sheriff who'd testified that Morgan was apparently, from his observations, not a drug addict and not an alcoholic; that he'd at first thought Morgan was, but now did not think so.

Morgan went back to the hospital.

There were ways to do things and ways not to do them. Morgan knew if he vanished with Kelly, there'd be a hue and cry, there'd be a search. That was the way of the system. He found a willing lawyer and filed quiet papers in the court of the same judge who had dismissed the criminal case against him. Morgan worked hard at his job, creating no waves, no controversy. He was offered a permanent appointment and refused it.

He adopted Kelly.

Then they moved on.

Each day he read the news to her. He told her what he could about famous people and powerful governments and about the rich and the deprived. As he read to her, he sometimes wondered whom she'd change and who would die. He supposed it depended more on what she saw than on what he read to her. She seemed bored but tolerant about the reading. He read to her anyway.

They spent that first experimental winter in Washington, and announced a world tour after the critics saw and commented excitedly on Kelly's splendid unexpected work with the heads of the president and his cabinet.

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THE DISCOVERY OF THE VOID

The pleasantest science fiction convention I ever attended was the 13th World Science Fiction Convention, held in Cleveland in 1955. It was a small convention (only 300 attendees) and very friendly, and I was the Guest of Honor, which helped.

I was even younger then than I am now, which also helped, and a number of my good friends were there, all of them (by some curious coincidence) much younger and handsomer than they are now, and some of them, alas, much more alive then than they are now.

One of the wonderful people I got to know well at this convention was Anthony Boucher, who was then editor of F & SF. He was the master of ceremonies at the convention, a sweet and gentle man, who is now dead and is forever enshrined in the hearts of those who knew him.

I was surprised, then, when I mentioned another attendee at the convention, to have the kind-hearted Tony snap, "I don't like him."

That was surprising, for the person under discussion seemed like a very nice fellow, and I had found no trouble in liking him (but then I have no trouble liking almost anybody). I said, "Why don't you like him, Tony? He seems like a nice fellow."

And Tony shook his head and said, "He doesn't drink."

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My eyes opened wide. I didn't know that drinking was a requirement for Tony's approval. I said, troubled, "But, Tony, I don't drink, either."

"That's different," said Tony. "He *acts* as though he doesn't drink. *You* act as drunk as the rest of us."

Drunker, actually. All those lushes at the convention sober up now and then and go about scowling at the world, but I never sober up. That's because I don't depend on alcohol, or any chemical substance, to get me lubricated. Life is one long high for me, and, in particular, writing one of these essays is enough to elevate me even in moments of difficulty. (I once wrote three F & SF essays in a row, without stopping, in order to retain my equilibrium when my beautiful, blonde-haired, blue-eyed daughter broke her ankle.)

So let's get on with it.

In ordinary life, we tend to think of air as nothing at all. If we look into a container that holds nothing but air, we describe it as "empty." In a way, there is some justice to this if we compare air to some of the other objects about us.

The densest material we know, under the standard conditions about us on Earth's surface, is the metal osmium. A cubic centimeter of osmium has a mass of 22.57 grams, so that its density is 22.57 gm/cm^3. (For those of you who have difficulty visualizing metric measurements, 1 cubic inch is equal to 16.39 cubic centimeters and 1 ounce is equal to 28.349 grams. Osmium therefore has a mass of 13.04 oz./in^3. However, I'm going to stay metric.

In comparison, the density of air is about 0.00128 gm/cm^3, which is about 1/17,600 the density of osmium. Under those circumstances, it is tempting to dismiss air as negligible in comparison.

The fact that air has mass at all, and that it is therefore attracted by Earth's gravitational field and can be measured as having weight, was not established until 1643. In that year, the Italian physicist Evangelista Torricelli (1608-1647) showed that if a tube, open at one end, is filled with mercury and upended into a trough of mercury, not all of it pours out. A 76-centimeter column of mercury remains in the tube, held there indefinitely by the weight of air pressing down on the mercury in the trough.

The density of mercury is 13.546 gm/cm^3, and that is 10,583 times the density of air. This means that a column of mercury suspended in a closed tube must be counterbalanced by a column of air 10,583 times as

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high as that of the mercury column. Since air pressure supports 76 centimeters of mercury, the air column must be 8.04 kilometers (or almost exactly 5 miles) high.

This was a revolutionary piece of information. Until then, it had been casually assumed that air extended upward indefinitely — certainly as high as the Moon and, possibly, as high as the stars.

Thus, in early science fiction stories, people were pictured as reaching the Moon by being hurled upward in a water spout, or through the help of large birds hitched to a coach. Such methods would only work if air were universal.

Now, for the first time, it was understood that the atmosphere was strictly a local phenomenon, that it hugged the Earth's surface closely and that beyond that was nothing. People had to accept the fact that between the Earth and the Moon (or, more generally, between any two bodies in the Universe) there was a larger or smaller gap of nothing at all. The only known way of crossing such a gap is by making use of action and reaction, as in a rocket, a principle first expounded by the English scientist Isaac Newton (1642-1727) in 1687.

In a way, then, Torricelli's experiment resulted in the discovery of space. To be sure, the entire Universe, including the Earth and you and me, is embedded in space. What is usually meant by the word, however, is the region beyond Earth's atmosphere where there is, essentially, nothing, and which is distinguished from space generally by being referred to as "outer space."

An alternate word would be "void," which, like "vacuum," refers to emptiness and which, for the purposes of this essay, I prefer. Torricelli's experiment, then, resulted in the discovery of the void.

How void, however, is the void? Is it empty? Completely empty?

For instance, the atmosphere isn't actually just 5 miles high. That would be true if the density of the atmosphere was the same all the way up, but it can't be. That could be deduced from the fact that, in 1662, the British scientist Robert Boyle showed that gases were compressed and made denser when placed under pressure.

The bottom of the atmosphere, in which we move, breathe, and have our beings, is compressed by the miles of air lying above it, so that we live in a sea of gas that is considerably denser than it would be if not for that pressure. As one moves upward in the atmosphere, there is a steadily smaller weight of it lying above, and therefore a steadily smaller air

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pressure pushing downward. For that reason, the air grows steadily less dense with increase in height. As it grows less dense, it spreads outward and upward and attains much greater heights than it would were the density constant everywhere.

Thus, at the top of Mt. Everest, which is 8.8 kilometers high, the atmospheric density is only about ⅜ what it is at sea level. That is barely enough to allow our breathing apparatus to pump enough oxygen into our lungs for life to continue. As far as its practical use to ourselves and to other living creatures, then, we might consider the atmosphere to be only 9 or 10 kilometers high.

Nevertheless, the atmosphere extends farther upward, becoming ever less dense, ever less capable of supporting active life (though seeds and spores of various kinds might survive). To follow its upward extension, let's look at the atmosphere in a different fashion.

Of a given volume of clean, dry air, 78.084 percent is nitrogen, which consists of nitrogen molecules, each of which is made up of two nitrogen atoms (N_2). Next, 20.947 percent is oxygen, which consists of oxygen molecules, each of which is made up of two oxygen atoms (0_2). Then, 0.934 percent is argon, which consists of individual argon atoms (Ar). Finally, 0.032 percent is carbon dioxide, which consists of molecules that are made up of one carbon atom and two oxygen atoms (CO_2).

These four components, taken together, make up 99.997 percent of the atmosphere. There are perhaps a dozen other trace components crowded into the remaining 0.003 percent of the volume, but we can ignore them.

We know the mass of individual argon atoms and the mass of individual molecules of oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon dioxide. Since we also know the mass of a cubic centimeter of air, we can calculate how many particles (a term we can use to include both atoms of argon, and molecules of the other gases) are present in a cubic centimeter of air under standard conditions. The number is 26,880,000,000,000,000,000, or nearly 27 billion billion.

At the top of Mount Everest, the number is still about 10 billion billion per cubic centimeter, and we can make do with that — just barely.

At 100 kilometers above sea level, the atmosphere is less than a millionth as dense as it is at sea level, which makes it an extremely good vacuum by laboratory standards, but that means there are still 10,000

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billion particles per cubic centimeter.

At 3000 kilometers above sea level, the atmosphere is less than a millionth of a billionth of what is at sea level, but that still means 10,000 particles per cubic centimeter. Even at 30,000 kilometers above sea level, almost one-twelfth of the way to the Moon, there are still 10 particles per cubic centimeter.

You can see that the wisps of gas grow ever thinner but do not necessarily ever decline to actual zero over extended space. It might get down to 1 particle per cubic centimeter, or 1 particle per cubic meter, and yet never get to actual zero. The void is never *entirely* void, in other words.

But there is no use in seeking perfection. We might arbitrarily set some lower limit of density in defining an atmosphere, and where the density is still lower we might call it the void. Thus, about the greatest height at which we can detect any effect for which Earth's atmosphere might be considered responsible are the aurorae, some of which can be 1000 kilometers high, at which height there are only about 300,000 particles per cubic centimeter. Let's call anything less than that "the void," not because it is absolutely empty, but because it is empty enough.

Under those conditions, all of space is void except for the utterly trifling volume in the immediate area of large bodies.,

Every star has an atmosphere, of course, as our Sun does, and every gas giant planet has an atmosphere, too, as Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune do. However, any object smaller than a gas giant rarely does. In our Solar system there are only four bodies that are smaller than the gas giants and that are known to have atmospheres. They are Venus, Earth, and Mars among the planets, and Titan among the satellites.

It was not long after Torricelli's experiment showed the limited nature of Earth's atmosphere, in fact, that astronomers began to realize that the Moon, for instance, had no atmosphere.

Let's ask a question. Why does argon exist as single atoms, while oxygen and nitrogen pair up and form two-atom molecules? Without going into quantum-mechanical detail, the arrangement of electrons around the argon atom is a very stable one. The stability cannot be decreased by having an argon atom share some of its electrons with another argon atom or with an atom of any other kind either. Argon atoms remain isolated, therefore.

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The arrangement of atoms around an oxygen or nitrogen atom, however, is not particularly stable. A considerable increase in stability can be achieved if one oxygen atom shares electrons with another oxygen atom, or if one nitrogen atom shares electrons with another nitrogen atom.

In combining, the atoms give up the excess energy required to maintain the unstable configuration in their single condition. To split such pairs apart, that excess energy must be supplied once more and be squeezed into the molecule. This is not an easy task and simply does not happen spontaneously under the conditions of the atmosphere around us, so that oxygen and nitrogen molecules remain in being there indefinitely.

In order for two individual atoms to share electrons, however, they have to be very close together, so close that we might as well view them as touching. As it happens, that is no problem under ordinary atmospheric conditions.

Suppose that all the nitrogen and oxygen molecules in the atmosphere existed in single splendor. What would happen?

With oxygen and nitrogen two-atom molecules separated into single atoms, there would be something like 53 billion billion particles per cubic centimeter, all of them atoms. If the atoms were moving, each one would only have to travel 3.5 millionths of a centimeter (on the average) before colliding. Since the atoms would be travelling at an average speed of about 6500 centimeters per second (nearly 100 miles an hour), there would be nearly 200 million collisions per second. That means that in just a tiny fraction of a second all the individual atoms would find partners. Oxygen atoms and nitrogen atoms would become oxygen molecules and nitrogen molecules, and the heat liberated would raise the atmosphere to incandescence.

As one goes higher, however, the atmosphere grows less dense. The number of particles per cubic centimeter are fewer and, therefore, more widely spread. A particular particle must travel slightly farther, and therefore for a slightly longer period, before experiencing a collision.

About 85 kilometers above sea level, a particle must travel a full centimeter, on the average, before colliding with another particle. About 600 kilometers above sea level, a particle must travel 10 million centimeters (62 miles!) before colliding. What particles there are in the void would hardly ever collide.

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Well away from the surface of the planet, the energetic radiation of the sun, ultraviolet and x-rays, can supply the energy to break up the oxygen and nitrogen molecules into individual atoms. (Such radiation is absorbed long before it can reach the lower reaches of the atmosphere to wreak havoc there.) The individual atoms do not find it easy to collide and reunitein the low densities of the void so that the higher one goes in the atmosphere, the more likely it will be that single atoms will be encountered.

At very great heights, oxygen and nitrogen tend to vanish almost altogether and what are encountered are, instead, hydrogen and helium. These occur in the lowest portion of the atmosphere in the merest traces. Five particles out of every million are helium atoms (He), with the most stable arrangement of electrons of any atom. Five particles out of every ten million are hydrogen molecules, each made up of a pair of hydrogen atoms (H_2).

Hydrogen and helium are the least dense of all the gases and would tend to float on the other gases, if temperature differences didn't tend to mix the atmosphere. Their particles are the smallest and lightest of the atoms, so that they move the fastest and are the least likely to be held by some particular gravitational field. For both reasons there is a greater tendency for them to find their way to the top of the atmosphere and to "leak" into the void than there is for the other gases.

It also happens that hydrogen and helium are the most common elements in the Universe. Of all the atoms in existence, it is estimated that 90 percent are hydrogen, 9 percent are helium, while all the other elements together make up the remaining 1 percent.

This may seem unbelievable when the vast Earth itself, as well as the Moon, Mars, Mercury, Venus and so on, are made up almost entirely of everything *but* hydrogen and helium. However, the Sun and the gas giants are made up chiefly, or even almost entirely, of hydrogen and helium, and since these five objects make up some 99.9999 percent of all the mass of the Solar System, the nature of the chemical composition of all the other bodies in the Solar system, including Earth, doesn't amount to a sack of feathers.

Back in ancient Greek times, when the philosopher Democritus (470-380 B.C.) was developing the atomic theory, he held that matter consisted of nothing but atoms. There existed, he said, only atoms and, between them, the void.

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Once Torricelli's crucial experiment was understood and it was found that air did *not* fill the Universe, it was possible to modify Democritus' view on a vastly larger scale. In the Universe, it appeared, there existed nothing but stars and the void.

Certainly, to the unaided eye that seems to be true. One can see the stars, and otherwise there is only black sky that seems to contain nothing at all. With the telescope, apparently empty stretches of sky are found to be full of stars too dim to be seen by the unaided eyes, but these stars are separated by apparent emptiness. No matter how great the magnification of the telescope and how many stars can be detected there are always empty spaces between them.

We might decide, then, that the only items of interest in the Universe are the stars (and any attendant planets they might have) and that the void is, so to speak, totally void of interest. What can you say about nothing, or about almost nothing?

And yet within a few years of the invention of the telescope, objects were discovered in the void that seemed not to be stars.

In 1612, the German astronomer Simon Marius (1573-1624) reported a fuzzy patch of light in the constellation of Andromeda. Such fuzzy patches were quite different in appearance from the sharp points of light that were the stars, and these patches came to be called "nebulae" (from the Latin word for "clouds"). The one discovered by Marius was called the "Andromeda nebula" for three centuries.

Then, in 1619, the Swiss astronomer Johann Cysat (1586-1657) found that the middle star in the "sword" of Orion was actually a fuzzy patch of light rather than a sharp point. That was called the "Orion nebula."

Such fuzzy patches multiplied as telescopes improved, and they were frequently mistaken for comets by over-enthusiastic astronomers. The French astronomer Charles Messier (1730-1817), beginning in 1771, compiled a list of over a hundred objects that might fool comet-hunters if they were not warned.

As it turned out, many of the objects on Messier's list were collections of stars after all. The Andromeda nebula is not a cloud of dust or fog, but is a vast conglomerate of hundreds of billions of stars, located so far away that the individual stars vanish into a luminous haze. Such conglomerates are now called "galaxies" and we speak of the "Andromeda galaxy." Thirty-eight of the objects listed by Messier have turned out to be galaxies.

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Other objects on Messier's list are objects in our own Milky Way galaxy, but are "globular clusters" and "open clusters," collections of hundreds of stars to hundreds of thousands of stars that blur together. There are 58 such clusters on the list.

Then there are stars that have undergone some violent event and have emitted vast quantities of dust and gas that glow in the light of the star. These are "planetary nebulae" and a few of them are on the list. The very first item on Messier's list is the "Crab nebula," and that is what remains of a star that has almost totally exploded as a supernova nine and a half centuries ago.

There are a few nebulae that really are glowing clouds of hydrogen and helium atoms, however. The Orion nebula is one of these. Two others are the "North America nebula" in Cygnus (so-called from its shape) and the "Lagoon nebula" in Sagittarius (so-called because it seems to consist of two parts with a dark channel or lagoon between).

The Orion Nebula shines because in its vast volume are a number of hot stars that heat its gas and cause the hydrogen atoms to gain energy, lose their electrons, and become ionized. Such ionized hydrogen atoms tend to give off their gained energy in the form of light. They constantly regain energy from the stars within the nebula and as constantly radiate it away in a kind of fluorescent glow that is characteristic of these "emission nebulae."

It might seem astonishing that this glow can be seen across the vast distance that separates us from these nebulae. The gas of which they are composed is extremely rarefied, for they possess only from 1,000 to 10,000 particles per cubic centimeter. This is a density equivalent to that of our atmosphere at a height of 3,000 to 10,000 kilometers above sea level and is low enough to make such nebulae meet our arbitrary definition of "the void." Still, when even such a thin scattering of atoms is spread over cubic light-years of space, it is enough to produce a visible glow.

There are thinner clouds with only about 100 atoms per cubic centimeter that are much more difficult to detect, since their densities are equivalent to our atmosphere at a height of 20,000 kilometers. Finally, the emptiest space, the voidest void, has only 0.3 particles per cubic centimeter (or about 5 particles per cubic inch.)

Not all nebulae glow, of course.

When the German-British astronomer William Herschel (1738-

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1822) was studying the Milky Way, he noticed regions where there were very few stars, if any. These dark regions had definite boundaries, sometimes very sharp ones, and on the other side of the boundaries might be regions simply bursting with vast numbers of stars.

Herschel adopted the simplest explanation. He assumed that these dark regions in the Milky Way were really starless, that they were tunnels of emptiness boring through the crowds of stars and revealing the darkness of the void beyond the Milky Way. Earth seemed to be so situated as to allow us to look into the mouth of the tunnel. "Surely," said Herschel, "there is a hole in the heavens."

There are a number of such regions, however, and with time, more and more were noted and described. By 1919, the American astronomer Edward Emerson Barnard (1857-1923) had catalogued the positions of 182 such dark regions, and by now the number known is well over 350.

It seemed to Barnard and, independently, to the German astronomer Max F. J. C. Wolf (1863-1932) that it was very unlikely that there would be so many "holes" in the Milky Way with their openings all pointing toward the Earth so that astronomers were able to peer into them.

It seemed much more likely that the dark regions were vast clouds of particles that contained no stars and did not, therefore, grow energetic and glow; they remained cold and dark. Such nebulae would block the starlight behind them, and would show up as a dark blotches against the light that slipped past them on all sides.

These "dark nebulae" did not seem to be in any way the product of stars. Rather the reverse, for astronomers now believe that out of dark nebulae, stars might be formed under the proper conditions. The entire Solar system is thought to be the product of a dark nebula that, a little less than five billion years ago, condensed to form the Sun and its planets.

If a dark nebula is large enough, many stars may form within it, and the first few of these would supply the energy to make an emission nebula out of it. In certain nebulae such as the one in Orion, intensely dark and small circular patches are seen. These are called "Bok globules" after the Dutch-American astronomer Bart Jan Bok (1906-1983), who first studied them in the 1940's. They are thought to be clouds of gas that are actually condensing as we watch and that sometime soon (in an astronomical sense) will become new-born stars.

The dark nebulae are, like the emission nebulae, made up chiefly of hydrogen and helium and are about as dense; but from their very nature

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they show us they can't be made of gases only. If a dark nebula has 10,000 atoms of hydrogen and helium per cubic centimeter, it may very likely also contain 100 dust particles (each made up of tens or hundreds of atoms, including, perhaps, those of silicon and various metals) per cubic centimeter.

We know this must be so simply because a dark nebula absorbs sunlight. A dust particle is 100,000 times as effective in absorbing sunlight as an atom or molecule of gas is. We can see this in the case of our own atmosphere.

All the gaseous molecules in our atmosphere do very little in the way of absorption of sunlight, but allow some droplets of water or fragments of dust to enter and the condition changes at once. There may be very few bits of liquid or solid compared to the vast number of gas molecules present but those few bits produce a fog or mist that obscures the sunlight.

If only 1 percent of the particles in a nebula is dust and the other 99 percent are atoms and molecules of gas, then the dust would still account for 99.9 percent of the obscuration of starlight.

Yet although some nebulae emit light and some obscure light, and although both kinds of nebulae are very noticeable because of this, something much more subtle and fascinating takes place in them, and it is to this that I will turn next month.

Coming soon

Next month: NEWTON SLEEP, a great new novella about a strange kind of Hell, by **Gregory Benford.**

Soon: new stories by **Marion Zimmer Bradley, Charles Grant, Ron Goulart, Damon Knight, Kim Stanley Robinson, Avram Davidson, Michael Shea, Michael Bishop** and many others. **Harlan Ellison's** column will resume next month.

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George Alec Effinger is a frequent contributor to F & SF. *In this, his latest story, he brings us a witty view of time travel in which the past is shaped, essentially, by popular opinion. The story was developed into a novel, BIRD OF TIME, which will be published by Doubleday in 1986.*

The Bird of Time Bears Bitter Fruit

BY
GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

You know the shock of utter terror, just as you're about to hand over a large sum of money for something you're no longer sure you really want? Hartstein felt it. He felt it in his stomach, and he felt his hand give a peculiar reluctant quiver as he gave his card to the man behind the counter.

The man smiled, not pleasantly. He was dressed in the uniform of the Agency, the silver and blue tunic with the leatherneck collar. There were five rows of ribbons on his breast, signifying one thing and another, all mysterious and unknown to Hartstein. The man was evidently a hardened veteran of the Agency; it seemed odd to Hartstein to see him behind the counter, like a travel agent or an airline ticket clerk. "Second thoughts?" said the Agency man.

"Well," said Hartstein, "no." He wasn't going to let this veteran see that the notion of a vacation in time made him just a little uneasy. It did, but not enough to make him change his mind. Really, it was the expense that staggered Hartstein more than the danger. But possibly, down underneath, buried successfully beneath rocky strata of more mundane worries, there was the tickling fear that he might be one of the 2 percent that never came back.

Hartstein was a young man, recently graduated from college in Mississippi, about to begin a new life as an employee in a doughnut shop, who had been given the large sum of money by his grandparents with the stipulation that he spend it broadening his horizons, by traveling either to Europe or into the past. "I'd love to go back in time," he explained to his father. "Europe will *always* be there."

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Mr. Hartstein considered his son's urgency about the past, which, as far as he could see, would also always be there. "You're going to have a great future in doughnuts, Son," he said.

And so Hartstein was standing at the Agency counter in the lobby of the Agency Building right in the middle of Agency Plaza downtown. "Any luggage?" asked the uniformed man.

"Uh-huh." Hartstein indicated a molded-plastic suitcase he had brought with him, with extra shirts and socks, camera and film, and whatever else he thought he'd need.

"They didn't have molded-plastic suitcases in ancient times," said the agent.

"Oh," said Hartstein, "that's right." He looked confused.

"Don't worry. We'll provide you with everything you'll need, costume, appropriate accessories, money, and so forth. We'll make sure your hairstyle and facial hair conform to the local fashion. We'll give you a quick ESB knowledge of language, customs, and background. You won't have to worry about a thing."

"I'm not," said Hartstein in an uncertain voice. "Worried, I mean." He looked at a framed quotation hanging on the wall behind the agent:

When great causes are on the move in the world, we learn that we are spirits, not animals, and that something is going on in space and time, and beyond space and time, which, whether we like it or not, spells duty.

—Sir Winston Churchil

It made Hartstein feel better; that was what it was there for.

"Good," said the man in the uniform, "you're my kind of man." And he smiled again, no more pleasantly than the first time. "Now don't tell me, let me guess. You're either the Library at Alexandria or Catherine the Great."

Hartstein was astonished. "The library," he said. "How did you know?"

"You college boys are all alike O.K., take this receipt up to the ninth floor, Room 972. They'll give you all the introductory material. You can travel anytime you like, just give us twenty-four hours' notice. You come in, take your ESB session, get outfitted, and we push you through the screen for your day in the past. You don't—"

"Can I go today?"

"What?"

Hartstein swallowed. "Can I do it today?" he said.

The agent shrugged. "Sure, of course. In a hurry? The library isn't going anywhere."

"It's going to burn to the ground isn't it?"

The uniformed man gave Hartstein a long, disdainful look. "They promised to hold off on that until after you leave," he said.

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"Oh, good."

The man handed the receipt across the counter. "Take that upstairs. Good luck. Next?"

Before the elevator got to the ninth floor, a frightening thought occurred to Hartstein. It seemed to him that with all the people traveling back and forth through time, college students and professors and fleeing felons and archaeologists and tourists and other people with personality disorders, and given that the Library at Alexandria was such a popular attraction, there must be thousands and thousands of present-day people crammed into the building, packed in shoulder to shoulder and presenting quite a spectacle to the legitimate citizens of the past. It was a wonder that the Agency itself hadn't considered this problem. Hartstein felt he had to let someone know about it before he, too, went back there and tried to fight his way to the scrolls.

Floors seven through eighteen were devoted to preparing travelers bound for pre-Christian eras. The entire ninth floor was set aside for the multitudes who wanted to visit the Alexandrian Library. The corridors were busy, and Hartstein pushed his way along, clutching the receipt, looking for Room 972. He wondered if all these people were going to go through the screen with him at the same time, if they would all arrive in Alexandria together, like a church group or a high school field trip from Carthage or Thebes. How would the Agency provide a cover story for this mob? Hartstein looked around; there were people of every race, every description. He felt that he would fit into the Alexandrian milieu, as long as none of the residents looked at him too closely. The tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed people could be passed off as Germanic mercenaries in the Roman legions, he supposed. The blacks might disguise themselves as Nubians or exotic princes from unreal lands. But how would the people with Oriental features explain themselves? Or native Americans? Or—

Room 972 was a large room; there was a counter across the front of it, and many desks and cubicles dividing the vast space to the rear. It looked like the kind of place you went to when the Internal Revenue Service wanted to ask you a few questions. Hartstein's stomach began to grumble again. He told himself that there was no reason for anxiety, but he couldn't shake the feeling of impending doom. Doom he had chosen and paid for himself, with his grandparents' money.

"May I help you?" asked a young woman. She seemed very bored. She was dressed in the same silver and blue uniform, but on hers there were no campaign ribbons. The cut of the tunic was less severe as well, permitting the general public to evaluate certain of her characteristics.

When Hartstein's eyes turned from

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the bustling activity around him to this attractive agent, he lost some of his fear. "I'd like to go to the—"

"The library, I know. Yellow slip, please." He gave the receipt to her. "When did you want to go?"

"I'd like to do it today, if I could."

She looked up at him and cracked her chewing gum. One eyebrow went up just a bit. "In a hurry?" she said.

Hartstein shrugged. There was a framed quotation at this counter, too:

The Bird of Time has but a little way
To fly — and Lo! the Bird is on the wing.
—The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

The lines didn't mean a damn thing to Hartstein.

"Today," said the agent, "let's see." She consulted several clipboards and a large black vinyl-bound notebook. "Well, you're in luck. There's no real problem with that. It's — what? — it's almost eleven o'clock. So we can have you ready by two o'clock. You realize that you will have exactly twenty-four hours in the past, no more and no less. So if you go through at two, then you'll be back tomorrow at two. Right?"

"I understand," said Hartstein.

"And you took care of everything downstairs? Uh-huh, it's all here on the voucher. So, is there anything you'd like to change? This is your last chance."

Hartstein wasn't crazy about the way she phrased that remark. "My last chance?" he said.

She looked up at the ceiling impatiently. "You can't be yelling, 'Wait a minute, I forgot something!' when they're pushing you through the screen. If you don't want to go to the library — if you'd rather, say, go to see them assassinate Julius Caesar — you'd better do it now. We don't want to have to listen to your kvetching when you get back."

The idea of Julius Caesar and Brutus and Mark Antony's funeral narration and all that sounded very attractive to Hartstein, and he considered it for a moment.

"But if I were you," said the agent, "I'd stick. You can spend all day in the library. Caesar's down and dead in a minute, and then everybody goes to have lunch. The rest of the day you might as well be window-shopping in the Agency gift shop, for all the excitement there is."

"You're right. I'll just hang with my original plan."

"Good boy," said the young woman. "Take the voucher through the swinging gate, follow the yellow line on the floor, and see Sergeant Brannick. Have a good time in Alexandria." Like nightfall in the jungle, boredom reappeared with terrible suddenness on her ordinary face.

Hartstein hesitated, folding the yellow voucher in half, and then again, and yet again. "Before I go," he said,

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"I'd like to ask you a question."

The uniformed woman studied him suspiciously. "Personal?"

"No, ma'am. I was just wondering, Won't there be a whole lot of other people in the library when I get there? I mean people from now, visitors like me, from the present. There must have been millions of people who've gone back there. I had a lecturer in History 110 who spent a week in the library. I think the Agency should start to think about how it's cluttering up the past with all of us. The Agency does some wonderful things, you know, but maybe it's overlooked this one little problem. I'm sure that if they gave some thought to it, someone here could come up with an answer."

She shook her head slowly. "You really think no one's thought about that before? You're some kind of bright boy, aren't you? You know something we don't know?"

Hartstein blushed. "I didn't say that. I was only worried—"

Once more she consulted the ceiling. "Don't worry," she said with a sigh. "It doesn't make any difference at all."

"All right. I was just...." He let the words fade away. He didn't actually know *what* he wanted to say.

"Through the swinging gate," said the agent. She pushed a button and a buzzer sounded. Hartstein went through the gate and followed the yellow line. It went through a small village of polished desks until it came to an end abruptly, at the battered oak station of Sergeant Brannick.

"Voucher, please," said the sergeant. He was a large man, as large as the agent who had sold Hartstein the ticket. He wore the Agency uniform, decorated with as many ribbons as the man downstairs had had. It seemed just as odd to Hartstein that Brannick would be employed here, handling the routing of tourists. Didn't the Agency need its experienced personnel in the field, patrolling the freeways of time, fighting the unimaginable crimes that temporal terrorists would certainly be plotting against the sleeping citizens of the present? "Voucher, please," said Brannick, more loudly.

"Sorry," said Hartstein. He gave the man the yellow slip, now bent into a tiny, neat square. "Will the library be crowded full of other people from the present when I get there?"

Brannick's eyes narrowed. "You won't see anybody there except the locals," he said.

"Oh? Why is that? Why isn't the place crammed like sardines with us by now?"

"Because 'The Past' is an objective concept, and it doesn't exist like that. Just like that necklace you have on. Subjectively it's a chain, although objectively it's only a collection of links. The past doesn't work that way. It isn't really a long line of links extending from 'then' until 'now.'"

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"Oh, I see," said Hartstein, even though he didn't have the slightest idea what Brannick was talking about. He didn't want to annoy the man. "I've done a lot of thinking about moving around in time and what it could mean and what terrible things could happen and all the awful accidents that might occur if you weren't careful and all that."

A visible change came over Sergeant Brannick. "You have? The time business interests you?" he asked, his voice suddenly hearty and full of hollow buddying.

"Uh-huh. What do you mean, no such thing as the past? Where am I going, then?"

"No *objective* past, I said. There's definitely a past, all right. You're going to Alexandria and you're going to see the library. While you're in town, by the way, why don't you run up to Pharos and see the lighthouse? It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, you know, and it was still standing where you're going. But tell me, you think that time travel is more exciting than, oh, spending a few days in Las Vegas?"

"I think so. I could have gone to Europe, but I decided to go back instead."

Brannick's smile got broader. His teeth showed, in much the same way a housecat's does when there's tuna in the air. "We'll talk later, when you get back. I'd be interested in your reactions to the ancient world. I'm a student of the period myself, you know." He looked down at his uniform and seemed just a little shy. "Don't let the Agency get up fool you. You can be a twenty-year man with a real iron ass and hash marks to your elbow and still get all weak in the knees when you visit a time and a place you've never seen before. And we have all of history to wander around in." He paused in thought. "But never mind. I've got to get you going or we won't get you through the screen this afternoon." He made a few notations on the voucher and gave it back to Hartstein. "You'll get a shot from the doc before you go, and then we'll pack your memory with what you need to know. The costuming comes after that, and it shouldn't take too long. The long white robe —I think you'd look best in that, make you a foreign merchant maybe — it would explain the odd accent and your unfamiliarity with things. Some jewelry, maybe a staff — no, you're too young for that. Well, follow the yellow line to the next station. They'll give you your physical there."

"Thanks," said Hartstein.

"No problem," said Brannick. "Like I said, we'll talk tomorrow. Give my regards to Cleopatra."

The doctor made Hartstein strip and stand with his toes on the yellow line. Then he told the young man to do all sorts of undignified things, some of which Hartstein couldn't believe had any diagnostic value. "Your

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injection," said the doctor in a tired voice.

"I've had all my shots and boosters," said Hartstein. "In school."

The doctor shook his head. "We have to inoculate you against things back there that don't even exist today. You'd have no protection at all against some of those diseases. You'd come back in such bad shape, in a week you'd look like Dorian Gray's painting."

"Like what?"

The doctor waved a hand. "Hold still," he said.

The yellow line took Hartstein to the ESB section. The procedure itself was quick, painless, and pleasant. He was given a mild sedative that had him drifting in a warm, secure dream in a few minutes. He wasn't sure exactly how the knowledge was put into his mind; all he knew was that the letters stood for Electrical Stimulation of the Brain. It sounded like a sinister process, but it had been used on Hartstein a dozen times since childhood, during his education. It was a routine procedure; he was no more afraid of it than he was of other forms of medical editing. He lay back on the molded couch and put the intangible contents of his mind in the care of the ESB trainee who took his voucher. An hour later Hartstein had been processed. He took back the yellow slip and set out along the line once more. He tried to draw on his new knowledge of Egyptian language and social behavior, but nothing came. He worried that perhaps the ESB treatment hadn't stuck, or that some kind of mistake had been made. He recalled, however, that he had had the same experience following his other ESB sessions. When he got to Alexandria, when he needed the knowledge, it would be there.

The last station was the costume department. A young man in a tight-fitting Agency uniform told Hartstein to have a seat. "It won't take long, God knows," said the costumer. "It isn't as if you're going to feudal France or someplace interesting." He gave a wistful sigh. "I've always wanted to work upstairs, you know. Fitting people for the Renaissance. Can you imagine the materials, the fashions? Maybe someday. Well, for now, here's yours." He handed Hartstein a large sealed plastic bag.

"This is it?" Hartstein asked dubiously. He tossed the bag in one hand. It weighed very little.

The young man shrugged. "It's hot there, I guess."

Hartstein opened the bag. "Do I have to try it on here?"

The agent closed his eyes in exasperation. "One size fits all," he said in a dull voice. "Oh, Lord, why me?"

Inside the bag was a white cotton skirt and some jewelry. "No sandals?" asked Hartstein.

The young man massaged his forehead in supreme weariness. He shook his head.

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"No robe? I go around bare-chested?"

The young man nodded. "You get a headdress, though. One of those bath towel things."

"Wow," said Hartstein without enthusiasm. He examined the jewelry: there was a gold bracelet with a large golden scarab, which was inlaid with lapis lazuli; there was an elaborate golden necklace with a lapis moon riding in a golden boat; there were two beautiful earrings, made of gold with cloisonné falcons, their wings arching to form perfect circles, inlaid with quartz, faience, and colored glass; there was a heavy gold ring depicting some Egyptian god or other. The priceless jewelry contrasted with the simple, rough cotton skirt. "Is this real gold?" asked Hartstein.

"Certainly is. You can't get out of this building without giving it back. And we can always get more of that jewelry anytime we want, just by going to ancient Egypt and getting it. Let me help you with that skirt."

"That's all right," said Hartstein, "I can manage. But what am I supposed to be?"

The uniformed man scratched his wispy beard. "A scribe, I suppose, or a valuable slave in a wealthy household. I don't know. I've never been there myself."

"Well, in History 110 we had a couple of weeks about Egypt, and I've seen this before." Hartstein held up the lunar pectoral. "This is one of the King Tut treasures."

"They all are, honey."

Hartstein stared for a moment, not understanding. "But how am I going to get away with wearing all of this pharaoh's stuff, walking around the streets pretending I'm just a middle-class country boy with a yen to read the classics? And anyway, I'm going to about 50 B.C., and King Tut lived about thirteen hundred years before that. All of this stuff, the skirt and the jewelry, is an anachronism. And the headdress, too. Where I'm going, they'll all be influenced by the Greek occupation and the Romans."

The costumer yawned. "No, they won't."

"They won't? Why not?"

"They just won't, that's all. Wait until you get back there and then take a look around. Just remember, sweetheart, that the past isn't always the way you expect it to be from reading books. How dreary that would be."

Hartstein was having more misgivings. "You can help me with the earrings," he said. "Did they have screw bases during the reign of the Ptolemies?"

"No, of course not, but do you want me to pierce your ears instead?"

Hartstein shook his head.

"Then just shut up and hold still."

The transmission screen itself wasn't impressive. Hartstein had heard about it since childhood, had even seen pictures of it, yet he had a men-

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tal image that included more adventure and excitement than did the real thing. He waited on a worn green-painted bench for twenty minutes while a couple of dozen other people ducked through on their way to various eras. Some of the destinations were easy to guess, because of the travelers' costumes: one fat, bald man in the October of his years wore the skins of some mottled animal and carried a crude stone hatchet; two teenage girls traveling together wore Agency-issue outfits that disguised them as flower children of the 1960s; a tall, thin man with a loud voice and a permanent sneer wore the toga of a Roman senator. It gave Hartstein a feeling of being backstage at the community theater as he glanced around the waiting room and cataloged the cultures and centuries represented by the panorama of styles. And, he reminded himself, they all came from plastic-wrapped packages in the Agency warehouse. The most complex courtier's costume must have seen constant use, worn and cleaned and stored away again like a rented dinner jacket after prom night.

"Mr. Hartstein?" called a woman. He got up and went to the screen. "Mr. Hartstein? Your voucher, please. Thank you. O.K., we're going to put you through to Alexandria now. You will arrive early in the morning of May 15, 48 B.C., a full year before the library will burn during Julius Caesar's siege of the city. Are you ready?"

Hartstein swallowed. He felt very nervous. His stomach was sending him sterner messages than ever. "I feel like a fool, dressed like this," he said.

The agent had probably heard that sentiment many times. She did not reply. She grasped him by the arm and led him to the flickering screen. Hartstein saw that here, too, there was a framed sentiment:

Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate.

—Dante Alighieri

He couldn't read Italian, but his high school Latin enabled him to recognize one word; "speranza" meant either "hope" or "breath," but he couldn't remember which.

"You will pop back here tomorrow at this time," she said. "You won't be able to do anything about it. Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, you'll snap back to the present. Try to keep track of the time, just to avoid any kind of inconvenience or embarrassment."

"Right," said Hartstein absently, just as she shoved him into the purple glow.

Just like that, he was in Egypt. He could tell, because of the palm trees and the camels. His first thought was, *Gee, it's just the way I imagined it.* He was standing on a long, broad street. He looked to his right and left,

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but the street went on in both directions, straight as a reed, farther than he could see. There were imposing buildings nearby, on both sides of the street, and he was startled to realize that he knew what they were: behind him was the great Hall of Justice and, beside it, the public gymnasium; before him to the left was the famous amphitheater; far away down the street in the other direction were the city's stadium and the hippodrome; directly in front of him was the immortal library. He looked both ways again for traffic, out of habit, and crossed the street.

The library's appearance surprised him. There was a huge flight of granite steps leading up to the main entrance; the stairs were like a tremendous cataract of stone, guarded on either side by placid-looking granite sphinxes. *It looks like the New York Public Library,* he thought. The resemblance was reinforced by the scores of people sitting on the steps. There were young couples holding hands, people talking together in groups of two and three, individuals idly watching the commerce of the city pass by on the great avenue, solitary loiterers dozing in the warm sun. All the men were dressed exactly as he was — barefoot, cotton skirt, headdress, showy jewelry. The women were even more remarkable in their tight, straight linen dresses and pleated, thin shoulder capes, their wide golden collars and inlaid pectorals, golden bracelets on their arms and wrists, golden rings on their fingers. Hartstein noticed that there seemed to be a lot of gold distributed among the common citizens. Everyone wore black or green outlines around the eyes. All the men looked like pharaohs and all the women like empresses. They passed the time in the pleasant weather outside the library.

Hartstein stood on the sidewalk, hesitating. Part of him wanted to rush up the steps and into the building, to get his hands on the great lost literary works of antiquity. Another part of him was still afraid. That part was momentarily stronger; it asked him first if he could account for the sidewalk. He could not. He accepted it as a face of history that none of the present-day authorities had bothered to report. It wasn't important; it meant nothing to him. He forgot all about it before he had climbed ten steps.

"Do you know what time it is?" asked one of the sitting men as Hartstein drew near. The Egyptian had his arm around an attractive dark-skinned young woman; when she turned her head sideways, she looked just like a hieroglyph.

Hartstein paused. Reflexively he glanced at his wrist, but he had no watch. he looked up into the sky and judged the time by the sun. "Nine o'clock, I'd guess," he said.

"Thanks." The Egyptian stood and offered a hand to the young woman. "Come on, baby, they'll be open now."

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Hartstein passed them and continued up the steps. At the top were three great bronze doors. He went to the first. A little sign on a pole stood in front of it. The message was in two languages, like the English and Spanish signs in airports. Here, though, there were hieroglyphics on top and Latin on the bottom. *That's peculiar,* thought Harstein. *In History 110 they told me that demotic script had replaced hieroglyphics long before now.* Thanks to the ESB session, he could read the Egyptian symbols easily, while the only word of the Latin he knew was *"ianuam."* The sign said "Please use next door." Hartstein smiled. *"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose,"* he murmured. He went to the middle door and swung it open.

Inside, the library was lit by sunlight streaming through huge windows on every wall set high above the bookshelves. Hartstein stood inside the door, paralyzed for the moment by the staggering value of this gigantic room, by the anticipation of browsing through the treasure of lost wisdom. He became aware of the silence, of the pervasive odor of old books decaying in their bindings, of the sense of great riches of the intellect not far away, on the shelves within his reach, on other shelves across the vast hall, in other chambers hidden beyond distant doorways, of uncounted volumes and forgotten authors....

And then, like a fish from the sky, a thought startled him. What was most unusual about the library was its overwhelming familiarity. *It's the ESB treatment,* he told himself. But it was more than that. There was too much that was just like the present. More than he would have guessed.

In the center of the immense open hall, there was a large desk. Two women sat behind it and glanced through papers and books. They were evidently employees — Hartstein had some initial difficulty calling them librarians — and he decided to begin his tour of the library with them. He went to the desk and waited for one of the women to look up. "Hello," he said.

"Hello," said the librarian, "can I help you?" Hartstein was stunned; she was the most beautiful woman he had ever met in his entire life. Her eyes were deep and bright and violet, lidded with Nile blue, made even larger by the black outlines that curved up toward her temples. She wore a braided wig as black as death. Her skin was tanned and smooth, the hairs on her forearms pale, bleached by the sun. Her features were striking and exotic in the way that some photographic models are, the type of woman one never meets in real life. She wore the same long, figure-hugging dress, the same short cape, and the same queen's ransom in jewelry. She smiled, and the stale, studious atmosphere in the chamber ignited.

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"I'm...." Hartstein looked around in panic.

"Can I help you find something?" she asked.

He nodded, desperate for an idea. "Do you have anything on philosophy?" he said.

"Of course. Go to that cabinet and look up Philosophy. When you find the book you want, make a note of the catalog number. I'll help you locate it. It will be over in that section, against the wall." She pointed past his shoulder, off in the general direction of the Sinai Desert.

"Thanks." Hartstein knew immediately that he had made bad mistake. He didn't want to do anything that would take him away from the desk and the librarian, but he went to the cabinet. It was made of blond wood and fashioned with wooden pins instead of iron nails. He put a hand on the solid door, but he did not open it. He didn't want to spend his time looking over copied manuscripts of things he hadn't enjoyed reading in college. He went back to the desk.

"Did you find anything?" asked the lovely librarian.

"No," said Hartstein, "I changed my mind. I was hoping I could find —by the way, what is your name?"

"I am Pamari," she said, looking down shyly at her work. Her long black lashes hid her eyes.

"My name is Stulectis, from the city of Mardenes." Both proper names had been inserted into his memory by the ESB process. They were both merely foreign-sounding nonsense words. There had never been any city called Mardenes, but it sounded as if there might have been. "I think I'd like something less difficult to read, something that would give me a good idea of how the citizens of this great city live."

"You can try over there," said Pamari, indicating a section of books opposite another desk near the rear exit.

"Thanks again. Oh, and would you forgive me if I ask you something personal?" Pamari glanced into his eyes and, embarrassed, looked back down at her papers. "Would you like to have lunch with me? I'm going to be in Alexandria only until tomorrow morning. I thought—"

"I don't really think so," she whispered. She was blushing furiously.

"I'm very sorry," said Hartstein, angry with his foolishness. "I shouldn't have—" He interrupted himself and went to look at the books. He tried to remind himself that he had come to examine them, and not to promote a twenty-four-hour romance with a woman who had been dead for more than two thousand years.

Another shock interrupted his internal scolding. The books on the shelves were just that — books. Not scrolls. Not whatever else the Egyptians might have done with papyrus pages (collected them in folders made

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of sheepskin, tied them together with cotton twine). They were modern-looking books, bound in leather, their titles and authors painted on the binding in neat hieroglyphics. Hartstein took one down and looked it over. It was called *Memnet's Shekel-Wise Guide to Parthia.* There was a neat cartouche of catalog numbers at the base of the book's spine. Hartstein opened it up; instead of hand-copied hieroglyphics, as he had expected, he was bewildered to see printed pages. He cried aloud in outrage, almost running back to Pamari's desk. He waved the book above his head. "What is this?" he said loudly.

"I'm sorry, sir," said the other librarian,"but you'll have to lower your voice. This is—"

"What *is* this? You can't have printing!"

"—this is a library."

Pamari took the book from him. "Mr. Stulectis, is there some problem?" She looked honestly upset by his attitude.

"Remember where you are, sir," said the other woman.

"Remember where I am," said Hartstein, more calmly. "Yes, I remember. I'm very sorry. No, there's nothing wrong. I made a mistake. I think I made a terrible, very expensive mistake."

Pamari didn't understand what he meant. She looked at him curiously; he felt the blood rushing to his face, and he went back to the books to hide his discomfort. He noticed that the sign above the section where he had found Memnet's magnum opus said "Summer Reading." He put the book back. Summer reading. "It figures," Hartstein muttered. He looked at other books nearby. There was one called *The Murder of a Simple Scribe,* by Adasirnat. There was *The Flax-Seed Diet,* by Architydes the Cytheran. There was *Self-Realization through Hubris,* by Epimander. There were more: *Passion's Scarlet Scarab,* by Germanica Drusilla Tarquin; *The Hittite Conspiracy,* by Menotepset; a large volume of *Who's Who in the Lower Kingdom; Osiris Is Dead Again,* by Ekartis, formerly associate high priest of the Temple at Amarna; *War-Chariots of the Nineveh Conflict, Volume II; New Voices in Etruscan Fiction,* edited by Quintus Flavius Mummo; and many, many more. Hartstein's face was dark with rage as he continued to read the titles.

If I can carry things back in time, he thought, *like this ridiculous jewelry, then I can probably take things with me to the present. I'll take one of these books with me. I want to see how Sergeant Brannick will explain this.* Hartstein chose a book from the "New & Novel" section, *The Shriveling,* by Karheshut of Thosis, author of *The Yawning* and *The Theban Bronze Implement Massacre. I can't wait for this.* Hartstein's fury had settled into a deadly, cold anger. When he returned to his own time, he was going to ex-

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pose the Agency and make such a disturbance that the time-travel swindle would be ended forever. He wandered around the library for a while, making notes of everything he wanted to report.

"Britannia, Isle of Blue Men" said a hand-glyphed poster above a small rack of books. Hartstein browsed among them for a few minutes, briefly amused by a volume titled *Papyrus-Reed Boats of the Gods,* which attempted to prove that the monuments at Stonehenge and elsewhere in Britain were actually the docking sites used by Ra, Horus, Isis, and the rest for their celestial craft when they visited their summer homes in the north. The book gave Hartstein an idea; he decided that sometime he'd like to visit Stonehenge while it was being created, just to learn what its prehistoric architects thought they were making. But, he reminded himself, if this visit to Alexandria was typical of the Agency's command of history, he may well find himself witnessing those ancient Britons building parking lots for the gods.

There was a bulletin board with plenty of community messages: scribes offering copying services, rummage sales, cats and mice mummified cheap, meetings of the Historic Obelisk Preservation Committee, lessons on traditional drum and improvisational cymbal, choice delta property shown by appointment only, a class in the cooking of Transalpine Gaul, moonlight monument tours and tomb investigation, babysitting, petsitting, palacesitting, the usual mix of come-ons and vital information. Hartstein was beginning to understand just how mundane the past could be.

There was a librarian telling a story to a group of children in the Young Adults division. The girls wore red-dyed shifts of light cotton, the youngest boys were naked except for the ubiquitous Tutankhamen-inspired golden ornaments. In the periodicals room were back issues of the *Alexandria News,* most of which were devoted to daily reports of fires in the suburbs and barge collisions on the Nile, with a few pages of personal ads ("SWM, 42, successful merchant, landowner, on intimate terms with Thoth, would like to meet SWF, 14-25, prefer broad-minded enslaved foreign princess, for mutually enlightening cultural exchanges, etc. No phonies or Carthaginians"). There were public service messages posted on the walls (WHAT TO DO IN CASE OF PLAGUES. *Hail:* Go indoors at once. Hailstones can be lethal to human beings and animals. Do not try to protect exposed property. Do not venture outside until you are certain the plague has passed. *Boils:* Apply hot poultices and appropriate charms. If prayers and sacrifices are not effective, consult your physician. *Water turned to blood:* Do not mix with wine or fruit juices. Blood is not sa-

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tisfactory for drinking, washing, laundering, or other purposes. Do not use the water until you are notified by the authorities that it is safe to do so." And so on). There was a huge section of mystery novels and a small section of books that tried to make sense of the mixture of Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and miscellaneous deities. There was a large selection of firsthand accounts of strange places beyond the known world (*Five Days on the Moon* and *A Journey to Africa's Land of Living Fire,* by Philopeides the Lesser). There was everything, in short, that Hartstein would expect to find in his own neighborhood library, and nothing that he had hoped to see in Alexandria. Aristotle's lost books on Comedy were missing, either checked out or stolen. The only thing by Aeschylus on the shelves was an early musical comedy called *Pythagoras Tonite!,* which had been written in collaboration with friends while they were all still in school. There was very little in the library that Hartstein found exciting or even interesting. There was nothing that he could carry breathlessly back to the present, nothing that shed light on the unanswered questions of the past, nothing that made Hartstein's expense worthwhile. Except Pamari.

"I'd like to check this book out," he told her giving her the copy of Karheshut's masterpiece of horror.

"Certainly." She seemed glad that his spell of madness and wrath had passed. She smiled at him; she almost made him forget his disappointment and frustration. "May I have your library card?"

"Card? I'm sorry, I don't have a card."

Pamari nodded. "That's right, you said you were from out of town. Well, if you're going to be here for any length of time — But you said you were leaving tomorrow! Why would you want to check out this book?"

Hartstein opened his mouth and, finding no answer, closed it. The silence stretched on.

"Something to read in your hotel room tonight?" she asked.

He was inexpressibly grateful. "Yes," he said. "I could return it in the morning."

"Well, then," said Pamari, "we could give you a temporary card for today. May I see your identification?"

His heart sank. "Never mind the book," he said lamely, "I probably wouldn't finish it anyway. And I'd much rather take you to dinner, and then maybe you could show me the city."

This time Pamari didn't crush him with her reply. "Yes," she said lightly, "we could do that."

Hartstein was ecstatic. "What time should I meet you?" he asked.

"Six-thirty," she said. "At the front door."

"I'll be there," said Hartstein. He left the library thinking of her, forget-

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ting entirely why he had come to Alexandria, forgetting the sham and farce the Agency had traded him for his grandparents' hard-earned savings.

While the library had been one of the most unsatisfactory experiences of his entire life, that evening in Alexandria was perhaps the most memorable. Every minute he spent in Pamari's company made him regret his modern life and dull and ordinary friends so many centuries in the future. Hartstein had to remind himself again and again that very soon he would return to the present, leaving Pamari frozen like a rare and beautiful butterfly in the amber of time. It put a not-unpleasant melancholy edge to his enjoyment of the ancient city.

Pamari suggested a small inn where they could have supper. Hartstein was curious about the kind of food he would get; he had no clear idea of what people in ancient times ate. As a matter of fact, he had no good idea of what people in modern Egypt ate. But yet it came as no surprise when the innkeeper brought large platters of roasted lamb and roasted camel, with bowls of dates and oranges. The innkeeper, a tall, burly man who looked as if he could handle any trouble that rowdy patrons might start in his establishment, carved the roasts himself. Hartstein was about to ask the man where he had obtained his golden necklace and golden bracelets and rings, but, recalling what he had discovered in the library earlier, he decided he didn't need to know any more answers.

There was a peculiar, sweet-tasting, light-colored wine with the meal, and as he drank more of it, Hartstein found the taste becoming more pleasant. "I thought there would be some Greek food," he said. "Because the Greeks ruled here for so long. The Ptolemies are a Greek family, and Cleopatra is more Greek than Egyptian."

"You do not like this food?" asked Pamari.

"I love it," said Hartstein, although he could have done without the roast camel. "But I expected more in the way of, oh, hummus and moussaka and baklava and that kind of stuff."

"I've never eaten those things," said Pamari. "You have traveled a great deal, haven't you? You've seen a lot of the world. I've never been outside the city of Alexandria."

Hartstein looked deeply into her sad eyes. "You would not believe the things I have seen," he said. He covered one of her small hands with his own.

"Tell me," she said excitedly. "Tell me what you've seen."

"I will. But I want you to tell me about Alexandria. I've seen nothing but the library and this little inn. And you."

Pamari looked away, suddenly shy once again. "The library is very famous," she murmured.

"But much less fascinating than

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you. Are you finished eating? Let me pay the man, and then we'll take a walk and you can show me the sights."

Pamari nodded. Hartstein drained the last of the wine in his golden goblet, left a few coins on the long table, and offered Pamari his hand. They left the inn and walked along the central avenue of the city, in the direction of the hippodrome. "What is back there?" asked Hartstein, pointing to the right, beyond the gymnasium, south toward what would have been the residential section of the city.

"Nothing of importance," she said. "I never go there."

"Why don't we? The stadium and hippodrome don't interest me. I'd rather walk with you toward nothing than spend my time looking at empty stone buildings." They turned away from the street and went along the eastern flank of the Hall of Justice. The way was dark and silent, and suddenly Hartstein was aware of how vulnerable the two of them were. He berated himself for leading Pamari toward who knew what kind of danger. There were surely thieves and robbers in ancient Alexandria, and there were no Agency uniforms around to persuade the criminals that Hartstein was to be treated as a guest of the past. "Let's go back," he said. But before he turned around, he saw something too strange too ignore. There were dark shapes ahead of him, houses and shops and other buildings, but none of them was distinct, even though a full moon shone down from the clear Mediterranean sky. The nearer they approached, the farther the shadows receded. After two hundred yards Hartstein knew that something was wrong. "Why aren't there any houses?" he asked. "Where are all the houses?"

Pamari was bewildered. "There they are," she said, pointing ahead of them. "Can't you see?"

Hartstein waved a hand impatiently. "They were just ahead of us ten minutes ago. We've been walking and walking, and I still can't make out any of them. I can't seem to focus on any single building. It's like everything away from the main street — away from the library — is vague and formless and not really there. I'll bet we could walk from now until morning without ever coming on a real house. Or a real person, either." He turned to her, wondering. He reached out and touched her face.

"I am real," she said, looking curiously at him.

"Are you?" he asked. He took her by the shoulders and pulled her nearer. She uttered a sigh; her languorous lashes hid the glistening eyes he would never see again. Hartstein bent to kiss her, cupping her delicate face in his rough hands. Just before his lips touched hers, he fell forward, stumbling through a purple glow onto the Agency's temporal recovery stage.

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"What the hell!" shouted Hartstein as he looked wildly around him.

"Welcome back, Mr. Hartstein," said Sergeant Brannick.

"What the hell is going on?" cried Hartstein. "What am I doing back here already?"

"It's two o'clock," said Brannick. "Twenty-four hours, just what you paid for. I suppose you're just a little disoriented. It takes some getting used to, flashing from one time to another like that."

"Twenty-four hours! It wasn't even twelve! I got there this morning and it wasn't even midnight yet. I had all night left. What kind of a cheat is this?"

Sergeant Brannick led Hartstein away from the recovery stage. Other travelers would be coming back soon, and it was important to keep the area clear. "I think someone neglected to tell you about the temporal Doppler effect," said the agent.

"Somebody neglected to tell me about a whole lot of things," said Hartstein angrily. "And I'm going to get my answers, and then I'm going to make things pretty hot for your Agency, too."

"Why don't we talk about it?" said Brannick soothingly.

"Sure, I'd like that." Hartstein took out his page of notes, the ones he had made during his tour of the library. He was dismayed to see that they were all written in hieroglyphics, which he could no longer decipher. "That's great," he muttered. "That's just typical." He crumpled the page into a ball and threw it on the floor.

"Sit down over here," said Brannick. "Some people are very upset when they come back. The past isn't always what they expected. Naturally, we're anxious to make up for any unpleasantness. We don't want any unsatisfied customers, you know. Why don't you just tell me why you're so agitated?"

"Agitated!" shouted Hartstein.

"Shh." Brannick indicated a man dressed in the costume of a medieval Italian nobleman. "You'll spoil his fun."

"I'll tell you why I'm agitated," said Hartstein in a lower voice. "They had printed books! Bound, printed books!"

"Ah. You found ancient Alexandria very much like our world in some ways."

Hartstein looked disgusted. "Not just your crummy similarities. I mean out-and-out anachronisms. Historical impossibilities. It was like a low-budget film made by uneducated fools with no imagination. Where was I really, some back-lot construction in Arizona? All ESB-trained union labor? Costumes, props, and nine-to-five Egyptians?"

Brannick took a deep breath. "You were really back there, Hartstein. You were really in the past. In ancient Alexandria."

"But—"

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The agent silenced him with a curt gesture. "But the past isn't what you think it is. It isn't always what you expect. There is no such thing as the objective past."

"I know, I heard that before. What the hell does that mean?"

Brannick massaged his forehead with one hand. "It means that the past depends on our ideas. The past looks like what we *think* it looks like, our consensus. There is nothing in the past that the present hasn't put there. If the majority of people today think there were knights in shining armor in fifth-century England, when you go back to fifth-century England, there will be knights in shining armor. It doesn't make any difference what historians and archaeologists know, what has come down to us preserved through the ages, what truly existed in those days. The past is a subjective museum of popular belief."

"What about the *real* past?"

"You were in the real past, the only past that actually exists. I know, I know. I understand what you mean: What about the objective past?" Sergeant Brannick seemed very tired; Hartstein wondered how many times a day he had to go through this explanation. "The objective past is closed to us. We can't find it, to be more precise, if in fact it really exists anywhere."

"So all time travel is a kind of legal con game," said Hartstein.

"Not really," said the agent. "Almost everyone is thrilled and happy with their vacations. The past is exactly the way they expect it to be. After all, it's their ideas that make the past what it is. A few people are disappointed, those who know a little more, who know what they're looking for. We have to explain the situation and try to make them understand that we haven't cheated them." He indicated other returning travelers, all laughing and joking, dressed in costumes from many times and many lands. "If anyone is to blame, it's them. You visited their conception of ancient Alexandria, their idea of what the great library was like."

"And that's why there wasn't much else to the city? Why I couldn't find the streets and the houses where the people lived? Why there was nothing but downtown history?"

"That's right. I'm glad you're catching on so quickly. People may know about the library, but they give little thought to what Alexandria, the rest of Alexandria, was like. So it's all vague and half-formed and patched up with clichés and fog."

Hartstein nodded. He had lost some of the sharp force of his anger, but he still had questions. "Then why was I snapped back here so early? I didn't have a full day in the past. I met a girl—"

Brannick smiled. "You *always* meet a girl, Hartstein. That's part of the popular idea of the past. That's where all the romance in the uni-

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verse is — yesterday. Every time you go into the past, you'll meet a girl. Anyway, someone should have told you that time is subject to a kind of Doppler effect, the way light and sound are. The farther back in time you go, the shorter the minutes become. You were gone twenty-fours by our clock. I don't know how many hours that would be in your Alexandria."

"You have an answer for everything, don't you?"

Sergeant Brannick looked down at his tunic, pulled it tight to eliminate some folds, and indicated his service ribbons. "Some of these I got for my distinguished career defending truth, justice, and the Agency way through all the aeons of time. The rest I got for knowing all the answers. Listen, I know you're still unhappy about this Egyptian business. That's not good for you, it's not good for me, and it's not good for the Agency. We want to square things with you, Hartstein. We're ready to offer you another trip into the past, free of charge, all expenses paid, anywhere you want to go, stay as long as you like up to five days. How does that sound to you?"

Hartstein said nothing for a long time. He watched men and women returning through the glowing screen from their holidays, from dead ages they had not perceived as somehow very wrong. *Why can't I be like them* he thought. *Why can't I just be satisfied with what I found?* Everyone else seemed to have had a great time; Hartstein felt a little envious. "No," he said at last, "you don't have anything I want. You can't give me the real past, and these adventures in Storyland of yours don't interest me." He got up and walked away.

"You don't realize what I'm offering you, Hartstein," said the Agency man. "I'm giving you access to the whole world. Think about it."

Hartstein turned and faced him. "Nothing you say will make me go back in time again."

Brannick laughed. "You're wrong, Hartstein," he said. "I see your type every single day. You'll come back, I can tell. Don't worry. That offer of ours will be waiting for you, whenever you decide to take it."

Later, after he had traded the Alexandrian costume for his own clothing, Hartstein left the Agency Building. A cloud passed in front of the sun, suddenly darkening the afternoon. Hartstein looked up, frightened, certain that he would see the Bird of Time overhead, blotting out the light and warmth. The great Bird had flown by, Hartstein knew, and dropped its little gift on him. Nevertheless, Brannick had been right. Sooner or later, Hartstein was sure that he'd have to try it again.

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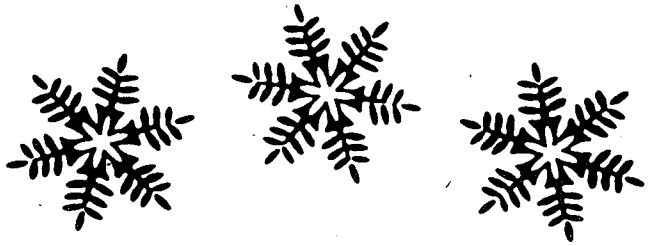

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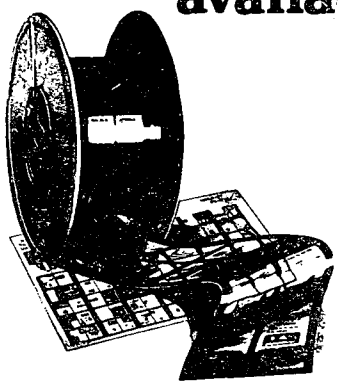

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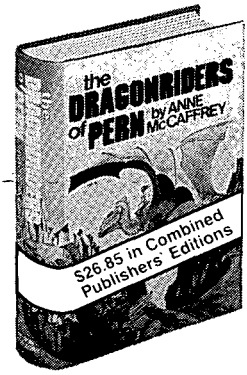

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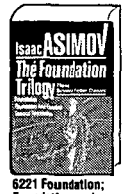

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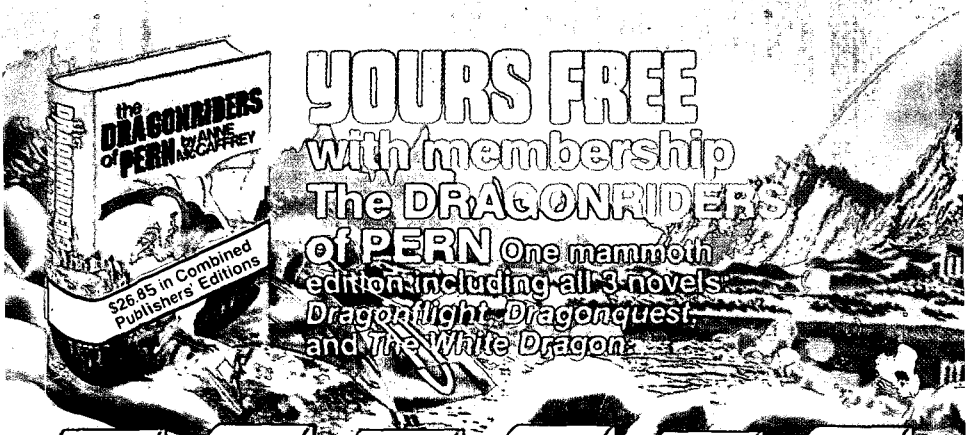
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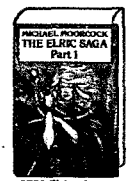

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